

A Bridge of Stories

Risking It All to Connect Classrooms and Cultures in Belize

A dirt road winds through a lush green landscape. The road starts in the foreground, curves to the left, and then curves back to the right. The surrounding area is filled with various green plants, trees, and a large palm tree in the background. The sky is clear and blue.

One Storyteller's Unexpected Journey
Kristin Pedemonti

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CHAPTER TWO

Legends of Belize—Shapeshifters & Spirits

Tata Duende

Perhaps the most prevalent of Belizean legends is *Tata Duende*, the protector of the forest. *Tata* means old man or grandfather in Maya and *duende* is dwarf in Spanish. The *Tata Duende* stories are found in every region of Belize as well as throughout Central and South America, with variations in the title character's physical description depending on where the story is told. *Tata Duende* is the traditional guardian angel of all animals and people of the forest. A kind creature by nature, he is often said to feed, protect, and cure people hurt or lost in the forest. He is a close friend to the animals and punishes hunters that kill more game than they need.

In Belize, *Tata Duende* is described as being about three feet tall with twisted backward feet and no thumbs. He wears tattered clothing—often red in color or animal skins—a huge sombrero that nearly covers his eyes, and carries a machete. He is

an excellent guitar player, and many children say he also loves the game of marbles. I found these two facts interesting, particularly since he is described as having no thumbs. He lives in the “bush” or forest where he protects the animals from over-hunting and the plants from deforestation. It is said that if you hear whistling far away, *Tata Duende* is nearby. If you hear whistling nearby, no worries, he is far away. Many of the stories warn people to not take more than they need from the forest: to conserve, preserve, and respect nature.

Older generations spoke of meeting up with *Tata Duende* in the rain forest, especially the men who worked as chichleros, those who harvested *chichle*—which was then processed into chewing gum—from the trees. They spoke of seeing a small man with twisted feet in the rain forest, where they claimed that he sometimes took their possessions or teased them with whistling and then disappeared.

I heard many stories about *Tata Duende* throughout my travels. Many stories were recounted to me as direct experiences of *Duende* as a trickster. I heard countless tales of *Tata Duende* hiding personal possessions, breaking dishware, routing through a garden, and the ubiquitous plaiting of the horse’s hair. *Tata Duende* is a trickster who appears in and around people’s homes, making mischief of one kind or another. I heard many tales in Bullet Tree Falls from Naida, a Creole and Mestizo woman who was one of the cherished staff members at the Parrot Nest, an inn that was my home base in western Belize. She would share with me how *Duende* visited her home in the early morning, plaiting the hair of her horse’s mane and tail in such tight knots

she would never be able to untangle them. I heard similar stories in Caye Caulker, San Lazaro, and Burrel Boom, villages where the residents would not have had much opportunity to interact with people from other villages as they are rather far apart and not readily accessible.

Tata Duende is also the protector of the rain forest and there are countless stories of him appearing when need be to honor the forest and its inhabitants—whether plant or animal. I heard stories of hunters who were taking more than their fair share and *Tata Duende* appeared to scold them, remind them to respect the animals, and take only what they needed. Often he would cast spells on them in which they would have no memory of their actions, but would awake with a new-found respect for the environment.

Children shared their encounters, too. They told of hearing whistling in the bush, going out to investigate and seeing nothing, but being so intrigued by the sound that they followed it until they got lost. Other children shared stories of their parents telling them that, if they cried, *Duende* would come and get them and “lose them in the bush.” A few children spoke about items in their homes being misplaced by *Duende*. Always, they shared stories of horses manes and tails being plaited with knots, the “handiwork” of *Duende*.

Lessons: *Tata Duende* teaches respect for the environment including the forest and animals, to not over hunt or take more than we need. The stories preach conservation and preservation of natural resources. On a deeper level, they also teach us to accept those different than ourselves or experience the

repercussions: to be compassionate and not judge a book by its cover.

Xtabai, Maya

Some say that *Xtabai* is similar to the Sirens of Greek lore, but rather than lure sailors to the sea, *Xtabai* leads men into the depths of the forest.

Xtabai, a legend from the Maya, is a shape-shifter: a beautiful woman by day with long flowing hair, a gorgeous body, and alluring personality. Although she has a deformity and is often described as having a goat or chicken foot or leg. She has the ability to morph into any woman's appearance she pleases. Her description varies depending upon which region the legends are told. I first heard of her as a woman with "clear" (white) skin, green eyes and long light colored hair. In most other versions, she was described as having long black hair, brown skin (Maya) and dark eyes. In either case, every story describes her great beauty, at least during the day. She spends her time beneath the Ceiba tree, which is sacred in Maya culture, patiently waiting for men to lure into the forest where she transforms into a horrible, serpent-like monster and attacks or devours the men. If the men survive the initial attack, they often become ill with a high fever. Some say that one can protect oneself from *Xtabai* by making the sign of the cross or praying. This protection applies to most of the legends in Belize except *El Cadejo*.

Most often *Xtabai* preys upon drunken men who are contemplating cheating on their wives or girlfriends. Her transformation varies. In some stories, they say she has a hole in her

back and her skin is rough like the bark of a tree; this is where she hides her spines during the day. Others say her head transforms to that of a horse's head, scales rip out down her back, and her nails lengthen into long claws as sharp as razors. Some stories say she can also transform into a snake or a prickly tree and when in the form of a tree she pierces the long prickles through the man mortally wounding him.

In any case, she is a warning to men to behave, to be faithful to their wives or girlfriends or deal with her wrath. Men spoke of being put under a spell by her beauty, unable to control their own actions and unwillingly following wherever she would lead them. There is a saying, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned." *Xtabai* certainly seems to fit the bill.

There are many legends about why *Xtabai* turned into a monster. The stories I heard told of how her husband cheated on her and in her anger she attacked or killed him. And now she seeks out other men who are contemplating cheating on their wives or girlfriends to teach them a lesson. Most of the stories I heard were not about why *Xtabai* did what she did, no back-story, but only described her current attacks or seeing her by the Ceiba tree in their own villages.

I've heard several stories of *Xtabai*, from children who say they saw her by the Ceiba tree, waiting for someone to attack. A female student at Immaculate Conception school in Bullet Tree Falls recounted how *Xtabai* stood by the Ceiba tree in her yard night after night waiting for her older brother. Finally, out of concern for their son's safety, the family chopped down the Ceiba tree. *Xtabai* disappeared and never returned.

In the book *Characters and Caricatures of Belize*, compiled by Meg Craig in 1991, it is written that there was a beautiful Maya woman of the aristocratic family with whom all of the men in the village fell in love including a handsome noble. Another woman in her village, an enchantress was also in love with the noble man and placed a spell on the beautiful woman that she would entice and throw herself at all the men in the village including the nobleman in order to turn the nobleman against her. Her behavior angered everyone, and she eventually lived on her own in the forest where she died.

My Own Encounter

I had my very own encounter with *Xtabai*, on a bus. While traveling to a relatively remote village in Toledo District Southern Belize, I was on a local bus, the only white person in a sea of beautiful Maya and Mestizo faces. I noticed two little girls pointing at me, with wide eyes, they were whispering, “*Xtabai! Xtabai!*” I had only been in Belize a short while at the time and had no idea what they were referring to. I asked several people on the bus if they knew who or what *Xtabai* was. Nearly no one spoke English, or if they did, they did not answer me. A woman sitting two rows behind me began to laugh. Finally she spoke, “*Xtabai* is legend here. She look a lot like you, long blonde hair, clear skin, green eyes. A beautiful woman by day.” I interjected, “Oh, thank you.” I spoke too soon as she replied, “Oh, gyal wait ‘til you hear what happens. At night she transform into one ugly serpent monstah, scales down her back and long, long claws. She got one leg of da chicken or goat. She attack men and sometime

thief (steals) children.”

Well, now I understood why those two little girls were so frightened. I did the only thing I could think to do, I got up, made my way into the aisle of the bus, pulled up my pants legs and showed them my legs. I pointed to my legs and said, “no chicken, no, bwaack bwaack.” They stopped crying. I pointed to myself and smiled, “I’m Kristin, no *Xtabai*.” They smiled, too. And the rest of the bus ride was peaceful though punctuated by a bit of laughter. All was well until I arrived at the school. As soon as I walked into the Kindergarten classroom, the children pointed and wide-eyed I could hear the whispers, “*Xtabai! Xtabai!*” Here we go again!

Lessons: *Xtabai* teaches lessons of fidelity, remaining faithful to one’s wife or girlfriend and respecting women in general. She also teaches about not drinking to excess or the potential perils of doing so.

La Llorona, Mestizo

La Llorona is a legend widely known throughout Mexico, Central, and South America. She is so famous in this region that there are entire books and movies about her. In Belize, *La Llorona* is described as a beautiful woman with long tangled black hair that covers her tear-stained face. She always wears a long white gown. It is said that sometimes she appears to float. She is usually seen by the riverside where she searches for her lost children. *La Llorona* forever mourns the children she drowned in the river.

The reasons why she drowned her children vary from

region to region and country to country. Some of the legends in Belize say that *La Llorona*'s husband often traveled and was away for extended periods of time. *La Llorona* became lonely and had an affair from which she became pregnant. She gave birth and of course the baby looked nothing like her husband. To avoid his anger, she drowned the child. Rather than be appeased, her husband was horrified by her actions and left her. In her despair, she drowned herself. Other legends say that it was her husband who had the affair and in her anger at his actions, to spite him, she drowned his children. Once again her actions had the opposite effect of what she had hoped; he left her and in her grief over the loss of her children and her spouse, she drowned herself. In all of the legends shared, *La Llorona* weeps by the riverside searching for the children she drowned.

Perhaps the most poignant version I heard was from a twelve-year-old boy in Bullet Tree Falls who told me he heard that *La Llorona* did not drown her children out of malice but out of mercy; that the family was quite poor and did not have enough food to eat. To spare the children the prolonged anguish of starving to death, she drowned them. Forever after she wanders the riverside searching for their lost souls or for other children to replace the ones she drowned.

Other children shared more innocent versions of the story as well. *La Llorona* was simply not minding her children and by complete accident, they fell into the river and drowned. And thus she is forever searching for them.

The *La Llorona* stories I heard were often very brief encounters of seeing a woman in a white dress floating nearby

the river and then disappearing into thin air. This legend was more often told as a warning both to adults to remain faithful to their partners and to children to scare them into listening to their parents lest *La Llorona* appear in order to steal them away.

Lessons For All: Think before you act. Once you do something, it can never be undone.

Lessons For Adults: Fidelity, honor your spouse, be faithful. Watch carefully over your children and do your best to keep them from harm. Do not have children if you cannot take care of them—This lesson was shared by grade seven students, and I thought it quite wise.

Lessons For Children: Obey your parents. Do not play by the riverside alone or at night. Stay close to home.

The legend of *La Llorona* is told for many different reasons; to remind adults to be faithful, to mind their children and to think before they act. The legend is also shared to scare children so that they obey their parents lest *La Llorona* come and steal them away, to teach children to not wander away from their homes at night or to play by the river alone.