

THE STORY OF THE TLACUACHE



**HOW THE POSSUM STOLE MEZCAL
FROM THE DEMONS**

Traditional tale, presented by

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-Agave Spirits-





Who is El Viejito, the tlacuache?

There are many myths and legends about the tlacuache (the Zapotec word for “opossum”) in Mexican culture. In this short story, we tell you how he stole mezcal from the demons and gave it to the people. It’s folklore.

To us at Cuentacuentos, it is much more. In our company and in our lives, the protagonists are the mezcaleros we work beside...

Those real-life tlacuaches who embodied the myth and make it real.

Each bottle of Cuentacuentos tells a real story. We invite you to...

*Be part of
the story.*



LA FIESTA.

*DURING THE TIMES WHEN
MAN LIVED IN DARKNESS,
THE DEMONS POSSESSED
THE FIESTA, THE FIRE,
THE MEZCAL AND
THE TOBACCO.*

CHAPTER ONE - *The demons enjoy their parties nightly while the humans live in privation, looking on with envy and desire for drink, smoke and the warm light of fire. The demons depicted are, from left, Mictlantecutli, Tezcatlipoca, and Cipactli - all powerful gods of the underworld. The humans seek ideas from among their animal friends for a way to steal these things from the demons.*

THE TLACUACHE PRESENTS HIMSELF.

*THE OPOSSUM OFFERS TO GO
AMONG THE DEMONS WITH A
PLAN TO BRING BACK MEZCAL,
FIRE AND TOBACCO TO THE
HUMANS.*



CHAPTER TWO - *Of all the animals, none were up to the task of stealing mezcal, fire and tobacco from the demons. Not the jaguar, not the rabbit, nor the eagle, nor the burro. Eventually, the opossum (tlacuache) spoke up, saying, "You did not ask me. That is because everyone underestimates me. If they think of me at all, they think that I am ugly, incompetent and small. I can fool the demons."*



THE TLACUACHE IS INVITED IN.

WHEN THE OPOSSUM SHOWS UP AT THE PARTY, THE DEMONS SAY, "COME ON IN LITTLE OLD MAN AND HAVE SOME MEZCAL AND TOBACCO."

CHAPTER THREE - Having volunteered to fool the demons, the tlacuache goes to hang around outside the demon's fire circle, watching on as they dance about, enjoying their mezcal and tobacco. After a few days of this, one of the demons, says to the others, "let's have some fun with this guy," then invites the tlacuache in, saying, "hey, little old man (viejito), come here, have a smoke, sit by the fire and drink with us!" And so our hero goes to smoke and dance and drink with the demons around their fire. The demons ply him with mezcal to get him drunk, but instead of drinking all the mezcal he is served, he hides it, along with the tobacco, in his pouch.

THE TLACUACHE WORKS HIS PLAN.

THE OPOSSUM PRETENDS TO BE DRUNK AND FALLS NEAR THE FIRE, LIGHTING HIS TAIL, THEN LEAVES RUNNING FROM THE PARTY WITH THE MEZCAL AND TOBACCO IN HIS POUCH.

CHAPTER FOUR - After some time spent sneaking the mezcal and tobacco into his pouch, and pretending to drink, the tlacuache, according to plan, acts the part, pretending to be drunk. This amuses the demons greatly, and so, persisting in their game, they serve him more. Eventually, the tlacuache reckons that he has gathered enough tobacco and mezcal in his pouch and it's time to go. And so, playing the part of the drunken fool to his demonic crowd (who are now in fits of laughter), he pretends to be so inebriated that he can no longer walk upright... he stumbles towards the fire...



THE TLACUACHE ABSCONDS.

THE OPOSSUM SHOWS UP AT
THE HUMANS, WHOM HE BRINGS
MEZCAL, TOBACCO, AND WITH
HIS TAIL NOW BALD, LIGHTS
THE FIREWOOD FOR THEM.



CHAPTER FIVE - Faking his inebriation, our wobbly hero falls deliberately - not into the fire, but close to it. The tlacuache then places his tail into the fire, igniting it. This, of course, causes the demons to fall over laughing, and through their laughter, they yell at him, "Time to go home, viejito! You have had enough, now go!" The tlacuache, pouch stuffed full with tobacco and mezcal, and his tail now on fire, runs off with the demons rolling on the ground laughing behind him. Running to the humans (who sit waiting hopefully), the tlacuache sets their pile of firewood alight and empties his pouch of tobacco and mezcal for them to enjoy.

THE HUMANS CELEBRATE.

THE GENEROUS ANIMAL LOST THE HAIR FROM HIS TAIL AND EARS, BUT
LIVED CONTENT FOR THE GREAT DEED HE DID FOR THE HUMAN RACE.



CHAPTER SIX - Now, lifted from their state of privation, the humans enjoy their mezcal, their smoke and their fire, all of which facilitate the fiesta - their own nights now filled with warmth, light and the joy of good drink, they share their stories with one another. The tlacuache still stops by from time to time to check in on us and make sure we have what we need. Having performed such a great service to humanity, the tlacuache often overhears the humans recounting the tale of his great feat of derring-do - fooling the demons into handing over the tools of the fiesta! To this day, the opossum, or tlacuache, a true hero, is held in the same high regard as the jaguar, the eagle, the rabbit, and the burro.

THIS IS ALSO, OF COURSE, WHY HE HAS NO FUR ON HIS TAIL.

INTERPRETING THE MYTH



Regarding the story of how the tlacuache stole mezcal (and the reason why I chose this little guy as the logo for Cuentacuentos), there is always more to a myth or folktale than its ostensible contents. They almost always represent deeper truths or carry with them a cargo of profound meaning. In the case of this tale, I believe that the tlacuache represents the Mexican people before colonial influence.

This is not entirely (or even mostly) my idea. Writer Rober Diaz put me on this track when he suggests in his article, "El Tlacuache o el Dios Ladino que Robo el Fuego para los Antiguos Mexicanos" that the tlacuache represents the national character of the Mexican people - smart, resourceful, and (critically) underestimated.

DIAZ POINTS OUT:

"...EL TLACUACHE Y SU LEYENDA PUDIERON FILTRARSE EN LA "ECONOMÍA DE GUERRA" CON LA QUE EL INDÍGENA SOBREVIVIÓ - SE CALCULA QUE UN APROXIMADO 25 MILLONES DE INDÍGENAS PERECIERON DURANTE LA CONQUISTA - ENGAÑAR EN ESA TIERRA AHORA DE CONQUISTADORES FUE SU FORMA DE SOBREVIVIR COMO LO FUE PARA EL TLACUACHE."



"... the tlacuache and his legend were filtered through the "economy of war" with which the native people survived - it is estimated that an approximate 25 million indigenous people perished during the Conquest - to deceive in that land, now that of the Conquistadors, was their way of surviving, as it was for the tlacuache."

Of course, Diaz' article is concerned with the persistence of the deity and the character of the tlacuache himself, who appears in several myths - including the one he recites in his article where the tlacuache possesses the godlike power of regeneration, a power not lost on anyone who has read myth at any level. In that story, the tlacuache has forgotten that he has invited a friend for dinner, and, upon the friend's arrival, the tlacuache quickly absconds to the river (away from the house) with his wife where he instructs her to flay him and cook his meat, after which event he self-regenerates, returning to the house with dinner.

Not only does he regenerate, but he offers his body to his dinner guest - and this, remember, is pre-colonial, and therefore pre-Christian. Nonetheless, the character of the tlacuache is what gives traction to all of the myths about him. Stealing from demons, serving the meat from his own bones to his dinner guest - a gesture that is generous, yes, but also deceptive and clever.

Abundantly generous, clever, the ability to deceive when needed... That's Mexico.



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For the sake of the myth retold on Cuentacuentos' bottles, I think we can safely read the story as entirely metaphorical ("filtered through the economy of war") - that the demons represent Spanish colonialism, and that when you understand it that way, you can start to unpack the deeper meaning of the story. But first, a brief review of what the other animals in the story represent in Mexican folklore. The eagle, revered for his ability to move between two realms (earth and sky), represents foresight.

cactus in Lake Texcoco, as Huitzilpochtli, marked empire of Tenochtitlan, Mexico City. The rabbit, in Mexican myth, intoxication and chaos. Mayahuel, the famous the agave itself, and, well, related stories unto herself.

dark magic, and the ability to hunt.

kings and political leaders, who traditionally adorned themselves with jaguar teeth, claws and skins to display their power. The burro (introduced by the Spanish) represents hard work.



The eagle, perched upon the prophesied by the god the spot for the Aztec now modern day a powerful character represents fecundity, She is the child of goddess who represents is a whole set of mezcal-

The jaguar represents ferocity,

This animal is associated with

Here's how I read this story: The eagle refused his help, because foresight was not possible in the face of colonial rule; the jaguar declined to help because the colonial occupiers were mightier, more ferocious, and in power. The rabbit declined her help, because she represents intoxication and fecundity and that's the reward the possum set out to acquire – what was missing from life for the humans at the time. And as for the burro: What good is more work when you are already subjugated?

That left the tlacuache – underestimated, often derided for his looks, cunning, with the ability to trick – an ability to conceal while appearing to be something else: playing 'possum. The demons in the story refer to the tlacuache as El Viejito, little old man, again suggesting that he represents those who first inhabited the land. The demons of course underestimate him, inviting him into the fiesta where he learns to distill, then they mock his inability to hold his alcohol (a head fake) and run him out. Out into the mountains and hills where the art of mezcal making was hidden, refined and celebrated in secret for over 400 years. Ha! Something was stolen from the demons, and, it turns out, it's a big deal.

Thank the tlacuache next time you raise your copita.

— READ SPEAR





*Be part of
the story.*



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