



ETHNOHISTORIES

Tain Vega

English

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FOREWORD

To facilitate reading in Ngäbere, we have adapted, with some modifications, the system in the short Ngäbere-Spanish dictionary Kukwe Ngäbere by Melquiades Arosemena and Luciano Javilla, published in 1979 by the Directorate of Historical Heritage of the National Institute of Culture (INAC), now the Ministry of Culture, and the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

VOWELS	CONSONANTS
a - Like in Spanish	/b/ch/d/g/j/l/m/n/ñ/r/s/t/v/y/ Like in Spanish
ä - Deeper than in Spanish	c - Like the soft sound of the /c/ in Spanish
e - Like in Spanish	td - Intermediate sound between /d/ and /t/, like /th/ in English
i - Like in Spanish	k - Like the strong sound of the /c/ in Spanish as in "casa"
í - Guttural sound between vowel and consonant, like the "klick" of some African languages	ng - In Ngäbere it exists in initial position, but in Spanish it does not exist in initial position as in "congo"
ii - An /i/ longer than in Spanish	IMPORTANT: It should be noted that in Ngäbere there is no /f/
o - Like in Spanish	
ö - Deeper than in Spanish	
ó - More accented than /ö/	
u - Like in Spanish	
ü - Deeper than in Spanish	
ú - Like the /w/ in English	

It should also be clarified that this story comes from narrators residing in the village of Potrero de Caña, formerly the Tole district of the Chiriquí province, now the Müna district of the Ngäbe Buglé region, from which the Agronomist Roger Séptimo, the compiler and writer is a native. Consequently, the phonology corresponds to the dialectal or regional variation "Guaymí del Interior" (Pacific slope) which differs from the "Guaymí de la Costa" (Caribbean slope of the province of Bocas del Toro and the now district of Kusapin in the Comarca Ngäbe Buglé) in the *Guaymí Grammar* of Ephraim S. Alphonse Reid, published in 1980 by Fe y Alegría. This variant corresponds to what Arosemena and Javilla call "Chiriquí" and which contrasts with the Caribbean variants of Bocas del Toro and the coast of Bocas.

This ethnohistory was published in 1986 in Kugü Kira Nie Ngäbere / Sucesos Antiguos Dichos en *Guaymí* (Ethnohistory *Guaymí*), by the Panamanian Association of Anthropology, with the PN-079 Agreement of the Inter-American Foundation (FIA) managed by Dr. Mac Chapin, Anthropologist, who encouraged us to follow the example he had set by compiling *Pab-Igala: Histories of the Kuna Tradition*, published in 1970 by the Center for Anthropological Research of the University of Panama, under the direction of Dr. Reina Torres de Araúz.

This book represented the work of the Agricultural Engineer Roger Séptimo, when he was a student in his second year at the Center for Agricultural Teaching and Research in Chiriquí (CEIACHI), Faculty of Agricultural Sciences, University of Panama (FCAUP), not only writing in Ngäbere the stories that he had heard from his family members in his community, but also his effort to translate them into Spanish as a bilingual person that he is, like other indigenous people in Panama, who are striving to receive a formal education.

The ethnohistories were compiled, recorded on cassettes and written by the Agronomist Roger Séptimo in 1983 and 1984.

As Professor-Researcher of Anthropology and Rural Sociology at the CEIACHI of the FCAUP, Luz Graciela Joly Adames, Anthropologist, Ph.D., encouraged Roger, as one of her students, to write the stories, convince him and show him that she would not exploit or abuse his work, but that he would get credit. Consequently, the anthropologist limited herself only to making some corrections of form and style in the Spanish translations without altering their content.

We encourage students from the seven indigenous peoples in the Republic of Panama, and teachers in public and private schools, colleges and universities in Panama, to write in their own languages and translate the ethnohistories and songs they hear in their families and communities into Spanish, as part of their informal education.

We also encourage readers of these ethnohistories in Ngäbere, Spanish and English, to draw the scenes that they liked the most, as they did in 2002, students in an Education and Society course, directed by Dr. Joly, at the Faculty of Education, Autonomous University of Chiriquí.

Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved by the General Assembly, in its 107th plenary session on September 13, 2007:

1. Indigenous peoples have the right to revitalize, use, promote and pass on to future generations their histories, languages, oral traditions, philosophies, writing systems and literatures, and to name and maintain their communities, places and people.
2. The States shall adopt effective measures to ensure the protection of this right and also to ensure that indigenous peoples can understand and make themselves understood in political, legal and administrative actions, providing for this, when necessary, interpretation services or other appropriate means.



Anthropomorphic clay figure by Cecilio Enoy Conzález Tejeira, Potter certified by the Ministry of Commerce and Industries (MICI) of Panama.

Hundreds of years ago, there lived two individuals who decided to train for warfare, because there existed constant expansionist threat from other people, like the *Mosigui* (Miskito), *Ngüitde Näg*, *Ngüide Rögüin*, and others. These groups always maintained themselves active in combat and carried out expeditions to conquer other territories with the intention to submit them to their domains.

Much earlier before the arrival of the Spaniards to our Isthmus, the Ngäbe maintained an arduous and almost permanent fight over this land. The fight would not cease and the conflict remained open. For that reason, people maintained themselves active, constantly preparing themselves to counterattack an offensive enemy, so as not to be surprised by the enemies and always waiting any attack by surprise from them. Then, it is said that the groups that carried out constant warfare incursions into the Ngäbe land were the *Mosigui*, *Ngüitde Näg*, *Ngüitde Roguin* and others.

This motivated Tain Vega and Tain Nötain to prepare themselves for warfare, to be ready to receive the war. They wanted to see themselves strong and invincible in the battle. In those days, the fight was with the arms known as *muntrün* and *bugo*, that were different types of arrows. Tain Vega and Tain Nötain wanted to be strong and resistant with these arms.

They wanted that the arrows thrown by the enemies, when making contact with their bodies, would not trespass their bodies nor feel pain or tiredness. That is what they wanted and that is why they started to prepare themselves for warfare.

It is not known how it was that they found someone to train them for warfare, but the truth is that they found him and knew him. There was a person who was permanently with them, who was training them for warfare. They would go to the jungle for the training, only the two of them, without the presence of anyone else. They would go the foot of a hill in the jungle, where the trainer would be waiting for them. The trainer would prepare the arrows in great quantity, sticking them on the ground with the point upwards, forming an extensive line at the foot of the hill. This man would order them to

climb the hill, at a considerable height from where they would roll down, to fall on the arrows that were stuck on the ground and that at the same time would trespass the bodies of both of them.

That is what they would do, according to the recommendation of the trainer. They would climb the hill to a considerable height, from where they would throw themselves rolling down. They would come rolling down and fall over the arrows stuck on the ground, that would trespass the bodies of both of them, getting stuck to the arrows in front of the attentive look of the trainer, who immediately would run to hold them and would trespass the arrows completely. Afterwards, he would cure them applying medicines on their bodies and, in a matter of minutes, the wounds would heal completely for both of them. Their bodies would not show signs of the wounds, as if their bodies would have never been wounded.

They would go almost daily to this training in the jungle. They did this in this manner so that continuously being trained, gradually, with time, they would acquire a condition that they would not feel the pain of the arrows which would not cause them any physical damage. They would do this according to the plan of the trainer who was preparing them. Thus, they were trying to become, with this training, in the same way that the trainer proposed to them.

They faithfully executed the training according to the norms imposed from the beginning under the care of their chief, until the moment arrived when they would not feel the pain of the wounds caused by the arrows nor would they feel tired from the physical damage. Then, they themselves would take out the arrows that had trespassed their bodies and immediately their bodies were intact, healed, without any evidence of wounds. According to the trainer, that is the way that their bodies had to become so as to go to the war afterwards. If not, then they could not go to combat. By acquiring the physical condition that the trainer imposed on them, they would be invincible in warfare. This was the objective of the training of both of them, and they had to do it as such, and that is the way they really did it.

After this, they became strong and resistant for all types of arms, for any type of physical aggression. They acquired a formidable physical condition. Their strength was monstrous in comparison to that of any common person. They could be cut with any kind of cutting object and their wounds would immediately close, their bodies becoming healed and intact without evidence of wounds and without feeling pain.

It was unknown from where the trainer came. Besides, after training these two, nobody saw him afterwards; for that reason, nobody could say exactly how was this man and from where he came. Only those two knew it and knew him, but it was a secret for them and nobody could ever find out. For that reason, there was speculation about this man, saying that he was a witch who trained these two men and that is why they acquired a monstrous condition, because in those regions there never was any knowledge about such a person and because there never has been any person known with such a capacity in the region after this incident that has been narrated.

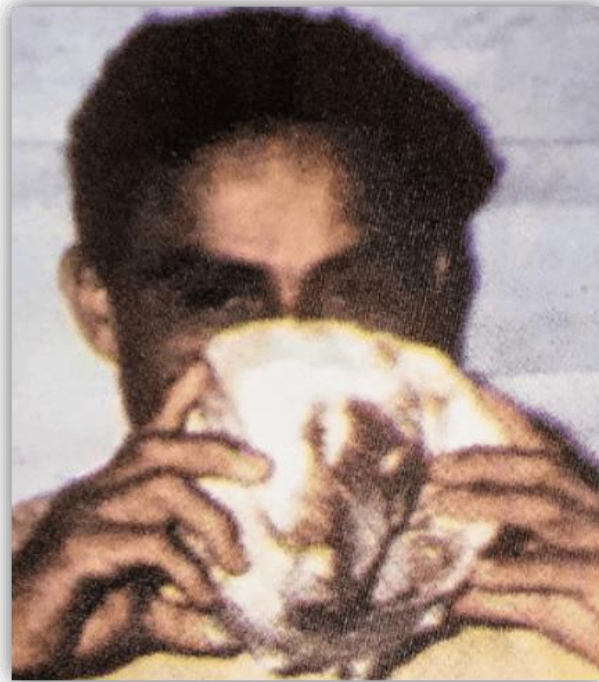
After finishing with the training and after acquiring an optimum condition for combat, the trainer told the two that they had to observe a strict diet for a certain number of days, that he himself imposed on them. This diet was so that, after this training, they would not acquire malign habits, that would be hurtful and harmful for themselves and for their own people, as a consequence of the training and physical condition. But, as they did this in secret and only they knew what they were doing, and it was completely unknown to their families, who could not look after the diets of any of the two. This was inadvertent for the families. After their training for warfare, and that one kept the diet while the other one did not keep the diet, because the families did not know at all about the diet, neither is it known if they went to war or not, since nothing is known about that and there have been no comments about the same.

But what is known with total certainty is that, after all this, Tain Vega became a cannibal, while Tain Nötain remained sane, with perfect judgment and did not acquire any other uncommon habit. The case of Tain Vega was because he did not want to keep the diet that the trainer had imposed; that is what is commented.

The cannibalistic habit of Tain Vega became palpable at the beginning by attacking the women, and that way began his cannibalistic activity. He became a monster in strength and power that was

invincible for any common person; and, therefore, he would do whatever he wanted without any kind of opposition, without any enemy of consideration. Then, both his family as well as the dwellers in the regions where he made his incursions, had a great fear of him, and that is why they did not reprimand him and much less attack him.

He, wherever he encountered women who were alone in their houses, on the trails, and elsewhere, he would grab and cut them. Then he would gather their blood in a seashell that he always carried with him and drank it.



The women would die after from that wound. Thus, one after another, Tain Vega went around the region doing this kind of action. Then, for the women it was a great danger to walk alone or be alone in any place; because any woman who met Tain Vega, became his victim; none could be safe. That was the work he was doing.

Suddenly, he also began to eat the dead bodies that were buried in different places. The dead would be buried, and he would take them out of the tombs and eat them. That was his work at the beginning, drinking the blood of women who became his victims. Then the dead would be buried, but the next day the tombs were found empty. These were the things that were occurring, one after another, throughout the region that Tain Vega would go about; and it happened that he was eating at night.

When Tain Vega dedicated himself to carry out his cannibalistic task, he also began to live in the jungle; he did not want to continue living in the house with his family. He went to live like a wild animal in the jungle. He would not let anyone see him and nobody wanted to see him either; but accidentally, someone would see him in the jungle. Aside from this, he could be seen almost everywhere; it seemed that for him there were no distances that he could not cover with his presence, because for him all the regions were near, and that is why people would meet him.

He always carried a seashell in his hand. As nobody could oppose the monster of Tain Vega, people only limited themselves to observe him. With time, it became intolerable, and people were tired of Tain Vega and did not know what to do with him. Then, the only alternative they had was to present this situation for the consideration of the *suguiás* (diviners). That is what they did; they put the case in the hands of the *suguiás*, so that the *suguiás* could give some advice of what to do with Tain Vega. By

that time, Tain Vega would not sleep nor rest at any moment, and would be walking day and night everywhere.

Since this monster could not be confronted by anyone and he was freely walking around, the *suguias* ordered that nobody should touch him, nor try to confront him, and only to prepare something for him.

The *suguiás* ordered to make four hammocks; then, to place them each one inside another one until converting them into one hammock, and then to place them inside the house, especially for Tain Vega. The *suguias* ordered to prepare cocoa especially for Tain Vega, to be chewed by women who were pregnant, and at the same time to take their hairs and make a rope with them. The *suguias* also ordered to get “jungle hairs” and “vines of old witches”. All this was ordered by the *suguias* and that all these things should be ready in the house, with the hammock, waiting for Tain Vega. All this had to be done during the wake.

This was done because they were going to drink cocoa as a war declared against Tain Vega, as a spiritual and psychological combat to dominate and oblige Tain Vega, against his will, when he arrived where the wake was being held, since he had left to live wandering in the jungle and did not want to continue living inside the house of his family. The people dedicated themselves to hold wakes throughout the region, all to dominate Tain Vega and, in them, the houses were prepared exactly with all the things mentioned before; so that, if he surprisingly arrived during the wake, he could not escape.

If at any moment he surprisingly appeared, the *suguias* said that he should be received immediately and be offered the hammock. In case that he sat in the hammock and if he asked something to drink to quench his thirst, immediately should be prepared the cocoa beverage especially made for him, that it should not be any other beverage but that one. After this, if he lay down in the hammock to sleep, rapidly, in the house should be ready the firstborn men and the orphans of father and mother, and they should gather around Tain Vega. In a very rapid manner, they should take the hammock and cover all his body inside it. They should enclose him in it and wrap him with the ropes made from the hairs of pregnant women, the “jungle hairs” the “vines of old witches.”

These were the orders of the *suguias*, which they gave to their people in order to trap Tain Vega. The *suguias* also warned to be very careful at the moment of wrapping him; to first see the eyes of Tain Vega. If he appeared to be asleep, that is when he was awake; and, if he seemed to be awake, then he was asleep and that was the moment when they should wrap him. This warning was so that the people would not be mistaken with Tain Vega at the moment of wrapping him.

Given all the necessary instructions, the people gathered in the wakes waiting for the arrival of Tain Vega, since the beginning the *suguias* gave the order to drink cocoa everywhere and wait for the presence of Tain Vega in any of the wakes; since, if he did not arrive at one, he could arrive at another one. At first, Tain Vega did not show up in any wake; but, after so much time passed with the wakes, he appeared in one of them.

One night he suddenly appeared walking toward a house where a wake was being held, walking completely naked. The people stood up and received him well and offered him the hammock so that he could sit, but he refused to sit in it. He remained standing, walking restlessly around the house among the people who had gathered there. Neither did he ask for cocoa to drink; nor would he talk with anyone. Then the people who were gathered there only limited themselves to observe his movements and his steps around the house among them, waiting to see what Tain Vega would try to do in their presence. Tain Vega only dedicated himself to roam among them without staying quiet an instant in any place, until suddenly he walked away and returned to the dark trail. He would do that each time that he arrived at a wake.

He would repeat this over and over again during the wakes; until one day, as was this custom, he suddenly appeared walking in a house looking very tired. He arrived and stayed walking in the yard of the house. The people who were there at that moment, received him and offered him the hammock to rest. He did no answer and remained standing for a long time, until he decided to sit in the hammock, and remained sitting in the hammock; and then asked for something to drink to quench his thirst. Rapidly they gave him the cocoa that had been prepared since the beginning only for him and gave it to Tain Vega to drink. At that precise moment he drank it, and after remained thinking and asked: “This is

the only beverage that all who are here are drinking?" Then, immediately, they answered in unison: "Yes, that is the only one we are drinking here." That was the expression that the people all said together at the same time as a choir. "Then all is well," he said accepting what the people said; afterwards, he lay down in the hammock. He drank some three times the cocoa beverage that had been prepared for him; and then he remained conversing in the hammock, something that he had never done before. Suddenly, he stopped talking and began snoring in the hammock giving signs that he was asleep.

The men orphans of father and mother and the firstborns who were ready in the house, gathered around Tain Vega, took the hammock and covered him all, with him inside, in a rapid manner. Then they started tying him with the ropes made from the hairs of pregnant women, the "jungle hairs", and the "vines of old witches." They all tied him well with these ropes and vines.

When he was completely tied, then he woke again. Surprised, he would move trying to break the hammock and the wrappings, but he could not. Then he spoke to all who were gathered there: "If I had known this a bit before!" "How sad, I had been told about this!" "Poor you!" He was talking this way, very disgusted, but it was too late for him. For Tain Vega it was impossible to break the wrappings and be free again: he had laid down in the hammock forever. He fell in the trap of his own people; he would never escape from there.

The people only had tied Tain Vega, the invincible monster to whom any physical aggression could not harm him, so the people who had tied him went to the *suguiá* of the place where they had him, to inform the *suguiá* that they had Tain Vega in their hands and at the same time ask the *suguiá* what to do with Tain Vega. They went to the *suguiá* of this region so that he would give the order and the form of how to execute Tain Vega. The *suguiá* who was consulted ordered to extirpate the eyes of Tain Vega; then ordered them to bury him alive, throwing him face down in a hole.

Obedying the order, they extirpated the eyes of Tain Vega, and then buried him alive, throwing him face down in a hole, as had been recommended by the *suguiá*. In this way there was again tranquility among the people who lived in the communities that were visited by Tain Vega. He was no longer a danger for the inhabitants, and they could, therefore, live in tranquility, without any risk of becoming victims of Tain Vega, above all, the women.

Before this, Tain Vega and Tain Nötain became enemies, because of the wife of the latter one. Tain Vega arrived at the house of Tain Nötain, where he found the woman of the latter alone. Tain Vega lost no time; as the woman was alone, Tain Vega threw himself over her and grabbed her. At the moment when he got her, Tain Nötain showed up. This motivated them to fight at that instant. In that fight, Tain Nötain broke the head of Tain Vega with his own seashell.

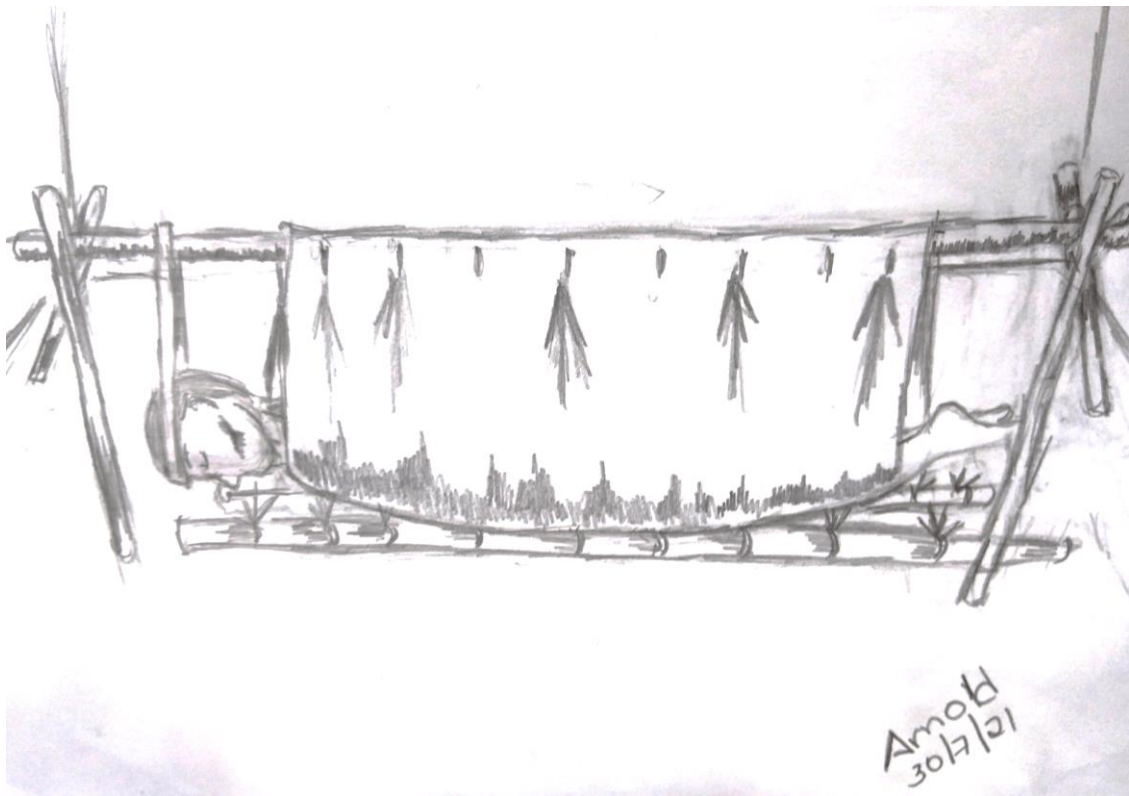


Since they both had had the same training and had the same physical condition, neither one could win over the other; but they fought for a long time, until they both mutually stopped the fight. From then on, they were considered enemies.

Tain Nötain never became a cannibal, nor did things out of the normal. But Tain Vega yes; and, as a consequence, became a victim of the *suguias* for his monstrous cannibalism, that in him was incurable. To eliminate it, his life had to be taken and so it occurred.

According to the Ngäbe, the most ancient enemies that they had were the *Ngüede Näg*, the *Rögüen*, and others, except the *Mosigui* (Miskito), who were more recent enemies during the Spanish colonial period. The sites where they had combats with these Ngüedes, are still known at the present time by the name *Türara*.

Nowadays, the Ngäbe consider that these groups became extinct a long time ago.



Drawing of Agricultural Engineer Arnold Troncoso of the burial alive and face down over stakes of Döido and Tain Vega for having become cannibals, according to the ethnohistories entitled with the names of these characters, respectively, recorded by the Agricultural Engineer Roger Séptimo. (Séptimo y Joly, 1986).

Note by Agricultural Engineer Roger Séptimo Jiménez

When we talk about Döido and Tain Vega, we enter into considering the theme of cannibalism. These individuals initiated this type of life, in different ways; however, in both cases they got to be extremely similar, so that is why we consider the fact of cannibalism as only one. According to the *Guaymies*, to get to be a cannibal or not, the person does not necessarily have a malign spirit, or practices other bad activities; and they can be sane persons who, under certain circumstances, can become cannibals. However, this practice is directly harmful for their families and communities. Therefore, the *Guaymies* considered cannibalism as a capital crime and there is no other remedy but a capital death sentence, which is no other than to bury the culprits alive face down.

For the *Guaymies*, the elemental and primordial base on which a society rests is a fraternal living together, with a humanitarian spirit, where human life is not something that can exist and be lost, but that life is something that has to be protected and respected above all things, and whoever attempts to go against it deserves the most rigid punishments. An individual for whom human life is worth little or nothing, his life must be valued as little or nothing and judging him does not contemplate any forgiveness. This criterion is what prevails in judging cannibals.

One of the causes that is attributed to Tain Vega for becoming a cannibal after the training to be a warrior, was that he did not keep the diet that the trainer imposed. This fact is emphasized because the *Guaymies* keep rigorous diets for many things and, if the diet is not kept, this can lead to other things. The reasons for these diets are not themes to discuss in this note, and that is why we will not analyze them; but the truth is that these diets have a very special meaning for the *Guaymies*.

The main part of the theme is that the *Guaymies* are peaceful individuals, loving life, and are not willing to accept any violation of that; but in case that a rupture is produced with this principle, then there is the sufficient moral strength to execute those responsible for such actions; and then prevails the social human conviction.

JOLLY

Luz Graciela

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