



ETHNOHISTORIES

NICI KÖGUATDA

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.

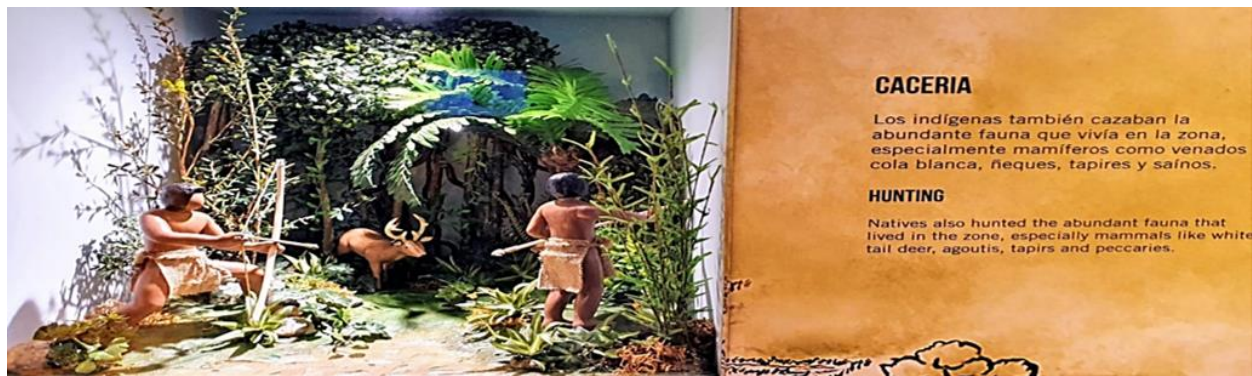
Article 13 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, approved by the General Assembly, in its 107th plenary session on September 13, 2007:

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.

NICY KÖGUATA

NICI KOGUATA

A long time ago, there lived an old woman. She lived alone, away from all her family. Every day she had meats in abundance. People could not explain why, being a woman and alone, she could have so much meat and permanently of hunted animals.



Exhibition and identity card in the Museum of Panama Viejo, photo LGJA 07/26/2019.

One day, one of her grandsons, with the interest to really know how it was that his grandmother had so much meat of hunted animals, decided one afternoon to visit his grandmother. It became night when he was in her house; but he did not intend to leave, as he had gone with the intention to stay and not go away until he knew with certainty the reality of the hunts of the old woman. When night fell, the old woman did not know what to do with her grandson and there was no other alternative but to talk to her grandson. The old woman told her grandson to try to urinate the maximum possible and then go to sleep at the loft and at no moment try to come down from the loft during the night. The clever grandson only limited himself to do and fulfill what his grandmother told him and then climbed to the loft.

When the night fell, tigers of all kinds, sizes, and colors started coming to the house from all cardinal points. In the house, there were wooden seats in the form of planks of thick boards, which is very common even today in the guaymi (ngabe) regions. These seats formed a circle inside the house, that at first surprised the boy who could not understand how was it possible that the old woman, who usually did not receive visitors, could have so many seats in the house. For whom or for what were those seats, the grandson asked himself. This doubt slowly began to clear and leave his mind.

Lying in the loft looking through the cracks in the of bamboo or pieces of bark of the *pixbae* palm, he saw the tigers arrive and accommodate themselves immediately in a file on the seat. Others that arrived would be lying on the bed of the old woman; that is to say, these were the preferred ones of his grandmother, and she would caress them as if she would be caressing domestic cats. Some arrived with hunted animals of different kinds.

He was observing all that was occurring below. Now knowing for whom were the seats, he limited himself only to move on the bed up in the loft. With the noise, the tigers would roar at the same time and would place themselves in a position to leap and attack. The old woman would tap them on their heads with her hands, trying to calm the tigers. In this way the night went on until the daybreak.



Radical Distilling, Highlands, Panama 2017.

When the day broke, the tigers left one by one in a file and left the house until it was completely empty. Then he came down from the loft already convinced to have achieved his investigation.

The old woman said to him: "Please do not comment anything of what you saw here and do not tell anyone; this is a private secret of my possession."

But, as always, there is nothing that is not commented, be it sooner or later, as nothing gets occult, because there will always be a person who will not let much time go by to tell the things. The grandson went running to his house and, with awe, commented what he had seen, without paying heed to the advice of his grandmother.

In those days there lived an extraordinary hunter known as Nici Köguatda, who became aware of the same thing and immediately tried to know the woman and find out if she had a daughter. Exactly, the old woman had a daughter who apparently did not live with her. Nici went to the house where the old woman lived and asked her to give him her daughter to be his wife. Sons-in-law of the woman and other individuals, with the eagerness to get rid of the old woman because of her witchcraft, recommended Nici, telling the old woman that he was a formidable hunter and an extraordinary man and that she would not have any problems, but that he would be at her service and take care of her maintenance. At first, the old woman did not seem to like this idea and did not accept Nici's proposal, nor that of his friends.



*The Botany and Natural History of Panama: La Botánica e Historia Natural de Panamá.
Editores William G. D'Arcy Missouri Botanical Garden y Mireya D. Correa A. Universidad de Panamá.
Saint Louis, Missouri, Missouri Botanical Garden, USA, 1985.*

But Nici indefatigably persisted in his desire. After so much telling her, he convinced the old woman, and she gave him her daughter. Nici's insistence was no more than a maneuver to find out the witchcraft that the old woman practiced and seek some way to finish it. It was not so much the desire to marry the daughter of the old woman, nor the wish to serve her, but of wanting to kill all the tigers

that the old woman had under her power, as these were the ones that did harm, eating all the calves that lived in the valleys.



Ngöbe Document Volume XII La Chácara – Living Art of the Ngöbe Woman, San Félix, April 1996.

After the marriage was accomplished, the old woman got ready to go to a nearby river to cut *kiga* (in ngäbere, pita in Spanish, *Ananas magdalenae* or *Achmea magdalenae* André) to make bags. Of course, Nici stayed taking care of the house, while the old woman and her daughter went to cut *kiga*. As this activity would take several days, Nici took advantage of this to go hunting in the mountains, with the intention to find somewhere the tigers of his mother-in-law and kill them with his arrows.



Ngöbe woman extracting Kiga fibers. Ngöbe Document Volume XII La Chácara Living Art of the Ngöbe Woman, 1996: 34.

In that mission, he went to walk to the mountain; and, for his surprise, he found two boys nesting in a rock cave. When the boys became aware of his presence, they got happy and lifted their hands as if wanting to grab or touch him.

First, he observed the two and saw that they had in their bodies hairs that seem the color of tigers. Moreover, in the hands they had stones of the colors of tigers, that they were forming them to convert them as the paws and fingernails of tigers. He saw that the two seemed to have scratches from which were growing hairs. He did not wait much time and killed the two with an arrow the fastest he could and left running for the house.

The old woman who supposedly was extracting fibers from the *kiga* by the river, in an incredible way became aware of the same and ran to the house to know what was happening and also know who was the culprit; although, beforehand, she already knew it was done by her candid son-in-law.

The old woman had many tigers, that gradually were diminishing as a consequence of the killings done by Nici.

The old woman had only two tigers left, of the most fierce ones and of her preference; and, she said that if Nici dare kill these two, then she would be convinced of the ability of Nici as a hunter. She

would say this as many times as she wanted, in a menacing and defiant tone. The two tigers had particular characteristics: the roar of one was like the sound of a piece of whistling gourd or blown with air and the other sounded like the song of the Midi, a type of wild bird.

But all these menacing threats did not seem much to Nici and he did not even give them importance as he was a very skillful person who never failed with an arrow, so he was willing to meet the challenge at any time and place. Nici knew where those two tigers crossed the trail and one day, he went to watch them by the trail. In those days, to hunt tigers, men used a cloak known by the guaymí (ngäbe) as a Klee-to, that could be a piece of cloth or the skin of an animal, that would be used over a shoulder to play with and confuse the tigers.

Nici would always arrive before the tiger would pass by. He would be ready with his arrow and Klee-to. Then there would be a tremendous noise of animals of all classes that always were the first ones to pass by; and, last of all, came the tiger to which he would throw the arrow. The wounded tiger would try to grab him with a formidable jump but would only get hold of the Klee-to and right then Nici would shoot another well-aimed arrow getting rid of the tiger forever.



Evolution in the tropics, Editoras Georgina A. de Alba and Roberta W. Rubinoff, Panama: Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute and Editorial Universitaria, 1982: 265.

When Nici went to live in the house of the old woman, he would always be consulting a *suguiá* (diviner and advisor in the ngäbe socio culture), letting him know of his plans so that he would not be a victim of the witchcraft of this mother-in-law, as she was backed by another witch to avenge her enemy. For that reason, Nici would seek the protection of the *suguiás*, so that he could not be an easy prey of the tigers, nor of his mother-in-law.

Thus Nici planned to kill the tiger that roared like a whistling gourd, and he placed himself in the path as he usually did. As always, smaller animals passed before ahead of the tiger, with their noise, to allow the tiger to pass after. That's how it happened; Nici could distinguish the wolf, the squirrel, the whiteface monkey, the plantain cat, and an amazing number of animals. Last of all came the enormous tiger that, at the most minimum sound, would look everywhere in search of his enemy or victim. At the precise moment that it was passing in front of Nici, the tiger seemed to perceive a sign in a tree full of vines and it stopped looking to the tree. Nici took advantage of this opportunity to shoot an arrow. With a formidable leap, the tiger jumped to grab Nici. With the talent and ability as a hunter to move rapidly, he left the Klee-to in the paws of the tiger, that grabbed it and tore it in pieces. The tiger immediately received another sovereign arrow; but, even so, did not die and escaped wounded from the hands of Nici. When Nici tried to follow the tiger, he heard a voice that said: "Don't go any further and return home." Nici looked and only saw in the tree, among the vines, a deer attached to the trunk, with his head downwards. Given the warning, he did not go any further and returned to the house.

When he went to report to the *suguiá*, after the encounter, that the tiger had escaped, the *suguiá* told him: "If you would have chased the tiger, it would have killed you, as it was waiting in a section where you would not have noticed it and then you would have been an easy prey of it."

It means that the deer that Nici saw was not a deer, but it was the *suguiá* who had transformed into a deer and was there to protect Nici of any imprudence that what have cost his life. The tiger escaped; supposedly, it should have been dead because of the wound that Nici caused it.

The old woman had only one tiger left. Then she decided to leave her house and go to another place where she would not have the headache that Nici was causing her.

She left the house, but Nici prepared her a treason. She went with the only tiger that she had left; she carried it on her shoulders, with both paws well tied. She got to a ditch where she was ready to jump, tiger and all, to the other side. At that precise moment, Nici, who was hiding, shot an arrow to the tiger. With pain, it tried to run, but the old woman pressed it against her body, not wanting to lose the last tiger. In that struggle, the tiger got her head with its teeth, tearing her into pieces, and then ran away without a route. Thus was the end of the old woman, who, at the expense of the tigers, would feed herself with all kinds of meats; but after, it cost her life.

It is believed that all those tigers were children who the old woman had stolen, as the ones Nici had found in the rock cave. Before, when all was mountainous, there were formidable witchcrafts, that the inhabitants of the region lived at their expense. Children of early ages were lost and could never be found.



Ecology and Evolution in the Tropics, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute 2007.

It is thought that some of these children would be transformed, after some years, into tigers, that, far from being beneficial to their people, became a serious danger for the inhabitants, as well as their wild and domestic animals. The children whom the old witches transformed into tigers, were the ones that were dangerous, killing calves and other wild animals, that then would take to the house of their owner as hunted meat. Among those could be found cattle, rabbits, deer, and others. That was the way in which Nici's mother-in-law obtained daily meat.

• El diseño **Nákray** imita al conejo pintado, que vive en los bosques. Los Ngöbe o cazan con frecuencia, porque la carne es muy sabrosa. Este diseño imita las rayas y los puntos, que él tiene en su piel.

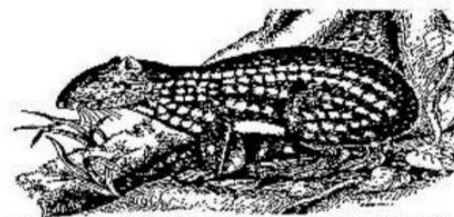
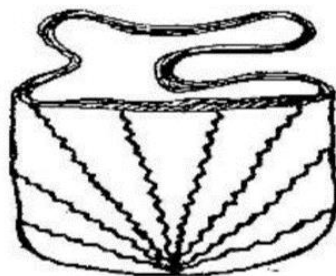


Ilustración n° 2: Conejo pintado (Agouti pascu)

When Nici killed the two boys in the cave and immediately ran to the house, the extraordinary thing of this case was that in a few moments his mother-in-law arrived, who precisely at that moment she should have been working with the pita. He could hear the old woman behind him as he was running to the house and would try to avoid her changing his route and cutting distance to get faster to the house. He could hear the voice of his mother-in-law saying: "He went this way, run over there, etc.", until he got to the house of a *suguiá* who lived nearby and got into his house. The *suguiá* immediately hid him in a private room so that the old woman could not see him.

In a matter of moments, the old woman appeared running and went to the house of the *suguiá*. She asked the *suguiá* if Nici was around there and the *suguiá* answered categorically: "NO!" and that he did not know such a person. The old woman, who was desperate, remained thoughtful for a moment, and then left. Definitely, she was not convinced by the *suguiá*, but had to conform herself to return to her house. When she was desperately trying to find Nici, it was because she wanted to kill him and even eat him; but, thanks to the *suguiá*, she could not find Nici. If she would forcefully try to get Nici, she would have had to face the *suguiá*, who, of course, was more powerful than her and all her gangs of witches.

When Nici killed the boys and the marathon that he made with his mother-in-law, she immediately took her daughter away from him, leaving him without a wife. Of course, this did not worry him in the least, as he was not so much interested in a wife, but in killing the tigers and put an end to the old woman's evil practices towards the inhabitants of the region.



Necklace of tiger teeth worn by hunters.

After this, nobody knows about the life of Nici Kōguatda. It is only known that he was a clever hunter never surpassed by anyone else, especially in this combat with the tigers.

Notes by Agricultural Engineer Roger Séptimo Jiménez

This narrative has as a background a woman who dedicated herself to raise tigers, becoming her house a den of tigers, that are transformations of children of early ages, whom she steals and recruits by diabolic methods that only she knows. Sometime afterwards, she transforms the children into tigers that then become a danger for their own people, dedicating themselves to hunt animals that they find on their path.

The woman, who led a life of witchcraft or of an evil spirit, dedicated herself exclusively to this work. With this, it is understood that all the tigers that she had were human beings, of a few times after their birth, whom she stole miraculously from different places and then would take them to the mountain, rearing them in an unknown cave, where very few times one could get there.

The importance of this narrative is not in the person of Nici Kōguatda as an extraordinary hunter, but in the life of the old woman as caretaker of tigers that after would serve her as hunters and for other things that she considered convenient. Now, these are not common tigers that live in the mountains

and that are free, supposedly, without any special owner and, if they do harm, it can be combatted with little risk. These tigers in the narrative supposedly possess diabolic strength and are guided by their owner, who is more dangerous than the tigers themselves. For that reason, these tigers are difficult to combat and whoever pretends to face them runs the risk of becoming victims of the tigers and of their owner. This is the reason why, before chasing them, the *suguias* are consulted so that the *suguias* can look after the life of the hunter at all moments in the same way that the old woman looked after the life of her tigers.

These themes of diabolic spirits and having a den of tigers are old, but at the same time are current in certain things. The Indians who lived in the past and nowadays live in direct contact with the jungle and the reality of the mountains, as a means of subsistence in living, believe in various phenomena that, according to them, are possible and cannot be happily tolerated saying that such things are gossips. The dangers that represent the tigers are real; but, even more serious, according to them, are the dangers represented by the tigers reared by individuals of evil spirit, who not only behave with savage instincts, but also are guided by other spirits of greater forces.

It is difficult to explain these facts and powers. It is not easy to understand them and can only be understood by the Indians who have lived and live completely identified with their way of survival in the mountains. Individuals who are strangers to this society and do not know the type of living within indigenous communities, may think that these are phantom beliefs, false witchcraft, and that in the practice these are false superstitions. We are completely in agreement with them, because in order to understand this theme one has to live with the Indians and understand their way of life and, above all, have been born with guaymi (ngäbe) Indian blood. On the contrary, it will not be easy to understand by persons with a common mind and who are accustomed to judge lightly anything and who are not accustomed to live and feel what Indians feel and think, because the Indians possess their own cultures, with all their own psychological and social implications.

In the narrative there appear four elements to take into account:

1. the woman of diabolic spirit;
2. the tigers who are transformed human beings;
3. a hunter;
4. a *suguiá* who was always guiding the hunter in the mountain in killing the tigers.

The presence of the old woman so soon in the cave behind Nici Köguatda when he killed the small individuals whom he found there, when in that precise moment she should have been far away from where he was, corroborates that she possessed evil powers as owner of the tigers that she raised. These types of persons of evil spirit, who practice witchcraft, are considered to be witches in some cases. Nevertheless, this word of witch or wizard is far from the guaymi (ngäbe) reality, but in the Spanish or English languages, this is the most that can be said to designate what it could mean.



Conference of the primatologist Claudio Monteza, via zoom, about capuchin or whiteface monkeys in Barro Colorado Island, Republic of Panama, that have become more terrestrial and less arboreal because there are no tigers to prey on the monkeys in this island.

For the guaymí (ngäbe), this is not the best designation. In ngäbere, (the guaymi or ngäbe language) exist names that really designate what these types of persons are, who are known as: *Kórare*, *Korácite*,

Nikórage, *Ngäbe Kórare*. All these words are completely guaymi (ngäbe), from the root “Kora” that means cat or tiger. It is not that some Indians are tigers, but the word is used to call persons who possess evil or diabolic dogmas. There are few *Kórare* individuals because very few times can be learned to be *Kórare*. This cannot be confused with witchcraft nor with white or black magic. One simply has to think that, as there are good people there are also bad ones.



Ecology and Evolution in the Tropics, Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute 2007.

JOLLY

Luz Graciela

PUBLIC DOMAIN CONTENT

