



## A selection of Taino myths



### The Rainbow

The forest dwarfs had caught Yobuenahuaboshka in an ambush and cut off his head.

The head bumped its way back to the land of the Cashinahuas.

Although it had learned to jump and balance gracefully, nobody wanted a head without a body.

"Mother, brothers, countrymen," it said with a sigh, "Why do you reject me? Why are you ashamed of me?"

To stop the complaints and get rid of the head, the mother proposed that it should change itself into something, but the head refused to change into what already existed. The head thought, dreamed, figured. The moon didn't exist. The rainbow didn't exist.

It asked for seven little balls of thread of all colors.

It took aim and threw the balls into the sky one after the other. The balls got hooked up beyond the clouds; the threads gently unraveled toward the earth.

Before going up, the head warned: "Whoever doesn't recognize me will be punished. When you see me up there, say: 'There's the high and handsome Yobuenahuaboshka!'"

Then it plaited the seven hanging threads together and climbed up the rope to the sky.

That night a white gash appeared for the first time among the stars. A girl raised her eyes and asked in astonishment: "What's that?"

Immediately a red parrot swooped upon her, gave a sudden twirl, and pricked her between the legs with his sharp-pointed tail. The girl bled. From that moment, women bleed when the moon says so.

Next morning the cord of seven colors blazed in the sky.

A man pointed his finger at it. "Look, look! How extraordinary!" He said it and fell down.

And that was the first time that someone died.

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### Night

The sun never stopped shining and the Cashinahua Indians didn't know the sweetness of rest.

Badly in need of peace, exhausted by so much light, they borrowed night from the mouse.

It got dark, but the mouse's night was hardly long enough for a bite of food and a smoke in front of the fire. The people had just settled down in their hammocks when morning came.

So they tried out the tapir's night. With the tapir's night they could sleep soundly and they enjoyed the long and much-deserved rest. But when they awoke, so much time had passed that undergrowth from the hills had invaded their lands and destroyed their houses.

After a big search they settled for the night of the armadillo. They borrowed it from him and never gave it back.

Deprived of night, the armadillo sleeps during the daytime.

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## The Stars

By playing the flute love is declared, or the return of the hunters announced. With the strains of the flute, the Waiwai Indians summon their guests. For the Tukanos, the flute weeps; for the Kalinas it talks, because it's the trumpet that shouts.

On the banks of the Negro River, the flute confirms the power of the men. Flutes are sacred and hidden, and any women who approaches deserves death.

In very remote times, when the women had the sacred flutes, men toted firewood and water and prepared the cassava bread. As the men tell it, the sun got indignant at the sight of women running the world, so he dropped into the forest and fertilized a virgin by slipping leaf juices between her legs. Thus was born Jurupari.

Jurupari stole the sacred flutes and gave them to the men. He taught the men to hide them and defend them and to celebrate ritual feasts without women. He also told them the secrets they were to transmit to their male children.

When Jurupari's mother found where the sacred flutes were hidden, she condemned him to death; and with the bits that remained of him she made the stars of the sky.

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## Love

In the Amazonian jungle, the first woman and the first man looked at each other with curiosity. It was odd what they had between their legs.

"Did they cut yours off?" asked the man.

"No," she said, "I've always been like that."

He examined her close up. He scratched his head. There was an open wound there. He said: "Better not eat any cassava or bananas or any fruit that splits when it ripens. I'll cure you. Get in the hammock and rest."

She obeyed. Patiently she swallowed herb teas and let him rub on pomades and unguents. She had to grit her teeth to keep from laughing when he said to her, "Don't worry."

She enjoyed the game, although she was beginning to tire of fasting in a hammock. The memory of fruit made her mouth water.

One evening the man came running through the glade. He jumped with excitement and cried, "I found it!"

He had just seen the male monkey curing the female monkey in the arm of a tree.

"That's how it's done," said the man, approaching the woman.

When the long embrace ended, a dense aroma of flowers and fruit filled the air. From the bodies lying together came unheard of vapors and glowings, and it was all so beautiful that the suns and the gods died of embarrassment.

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## The Rivers and the Sea

There was no water in the forest of the Chocos. God knew that the ant had it and asked her for some. She didn't want to listen. God tightened her waist, making it permanently slim, and the ant exuded the water she kept in her belly.

"Now tell me where you got it."

The ant led God to a tree that had nothing unusual about it.

Frogs and men with axes worked on it for four days and four nights, but the tree wouldn't fall. A liana kept it from touching the ground.

God ordered the toucan, "Cut it."

The toucan couldn't, and for that was sentenced to eat fruit whole.

The macaw cut the liana with his hard, sharp beak.

When the water tree fell, the sea was born from its trunk and the rivers from its branches.

All of the water was sweet. It was the Devil that kept chucking fistfuls of salt into it.

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## The Bat

When time was yet in the cradle, there was no uglier creature in the world than the bat.

The bat went up to heaven to look for God. He didn't say, "I'm bored with being hideous. Give me colored feathers." No. He said, "Please give me feathers, I'm dying of cold."

But God had not a single feather left over.

"Each bird will give you a feather," he decided.

Thus the bat got the white feather of the dove and the green one of the parrot, the iridescent one of the hummingbird, the pink one of the flamingo, the red of the cardinal's tuft and the blue of the kingfisher's back, the clayey one of the eagle's wing, and the sun feather that burns in the breast of the toucan.

The bat, luxuriant with colors and softness, moved between earth and clouds. Wherever he went, the air became pleasant and the birds dumb with admiration. According to the Zapotec peoples, the rainbow was born of the echo of his flight.

Vanity puffed out his chest. He acquired a disdainful look and made insulting remarks.

The birds called a meeting. Together they flew up to God. "The bat makes fun of us," they complained. "And what's more, we feel cold for lack of the feathers he took."

Jèalous, Pachacamac caught the newborn baby and chopped it to pieces. But suddenly he repented, or was scared of the anger of his father, the sun, and scattered about the world the pieces of his murdered brother.

From the teeth of the dead baby, corn grew; from the ribs and bones, cassava. The blood made the land fertile, and fruit trees and shade trees rose from the sown flesh.

Thus the women and men born on these shores, where it never rains, find food.

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Tobacco

Next day, when the bat shook his feathers in full flight, he suddenly became naked. A rain of feathers fell to earth.

He is still searching for them. Blind and ugly, enemy of the light, he lives hidden in caves. He goes out in pursuit of the lost feathers after night has fallen and flies very fast, never stopping because it shames him to be seen.

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## Mosquitos

There were many dead in the Nooktas village. In each dead body there was a hole through which blood had been stolen.

The murderer, a child who was already killing before he learned to walk, received his sentence roaring with laughter. They pierced him with lances and he laughingly picked them out of his body like thorns.

"I'll teach you to kill me," said the child.

He suggested to his executioners that they should light a big bonfire and throw him into it.

His ashes scattered through the air, anxious to do harm, and thus the first mosquitos started to fly.

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## Honey

Honey was in flight from his two sisters-in-law. They had thrown him out of the hammock several times.

They came after him night and day. They was him and it made their mouths water. Only in dreams did they succeed in touching him, licking him, eating him.

Their spite kept growing. One morning when the sisters-in-law were bathing, they came upon Honey on the riverbank. They ran and splashed him. Once wet, Honey dissolved.

In the Gulf of Paria it's not easy to find the lost honey. You have to climb the trees, ax in hand, open up the trunks, and do a lot of rummaging. The rare honey is eaten with pleasure and with fear, because sometimes it kills.

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## Seeds

Pachacamac, who was a son of the sun, made a man and a woman in the dunes of Lurin.

There was nothing to eat, and the man died of hunger.

When the man was about to be crushed by the sun, the sun entered his and made a child.

The Cariri Indians had implored the Grandfather to let them try the flesh of wild pigs, which didn't yet exist. The Grandfather, architect of the Universe, kidnapped the little children of the Cariris and turned them into wild pigs. He created a big tree so that they could escape into the sky.

The people pursued the pigs up the tree from branch to branch and managed to kill a few. The Grandfather ordered the ants to bring down the tree. When it fell, the people suffered broken bones. Ever since that great fall, we all have divided bones and so are able to bend our fingers and legs or tilt our bodies.

With the dead boars a great banquet was made in the village.

The people besought the Grandfather to come down from the sky, where he was minding the children saved from the hunt, but he preferred to stay up there.

The Grandfather sent tobacco to take his place among men. Smoking, the people talked with God.

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## Dangers

He who made the sun and the moon warned the Tainos to watch out for the dead.

In the daytime the dead hid themselves and ate guavas, but at night they went out for a stroll and challenged the living. Dead men offered duels and dead women, love. In the duels they vanished at will; and at the climax of love the lover found himself with nothing in his arms. Before accepting a duel with a man or lying down with a woman, one should feel the belly with one's hand, because the dead have no navels.

The lord of the sky also warned the Tainos to watch out even more for people with clothes on.

Chief Caicihu fasted for a week and was worthy of his words. "Brief shall be the enjoyment of life," announced the invisible one, he who has a mother but no beginning. "Men wearing clothes shall come, dominate, and kill."

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*Taken from **Memory of Fire: Genesis** by Eduardo Galeano (Pantheon Books, 1985).*



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