

ŠERENTE TALES

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[Note. The Šerente are a Central Gě tribe located on both sides of the Rio Tocantins, between 8° and 10° S. latitude. The Šavante, who are essentially identical in speech and custom and who have often been confounded with them, have been politically quite distinct since about 1850, when they definitely abandoned the area east of the Araguaya.]

1. *Fire*¹

At a time before the Šerente had fire a man went into the woods with his little brother-in-law in order to take young araras out of a nest in the hollow of a tree. He leaned a pole as a ladder against the tree, and the boy climbed up. But though there were young birds in the nest, he declared when he got up that there were only eggs there. "No," said the man, "I know there are young birds in the nest." So the boy took a white stone he had in his mouth and showed it to the man below, saying, "See, there are really only eggs in it!" "Then throw them down!" the man told him. The lad dropped the stone, which turned into an egg that was smashed against the ground. So the man got angry, pulled away the ladder so that his little brother-in-law was unable to climb down, and went home.

The boy remained sitting in the tree for five days. Then a jaguar passed by and asked what he was doing up there. The boy told him how his brother-in-law had removed the ladder so he could not get down. Then the jaguar made him first throw down the two young araras, then told the boy to jump after them. He did, and the jaguar, growling, caught him between his front paws. Then the boy was very much afraid, but nothing happened to him.

The jaguar took him on his shoulders and carried him away. "Is there no water here?" asked the boy, who was suffering greatly from thirst. "Yes," answered the jaguar, "but the water here belongs to the urubú (carrion vulture), and you must not drink it." Then they came to a second creek, but there, too, the boy was not permitted to drink, because it belonged to the little birds. Finally, at the third creek, the jaguar set him down, and now the boy drank so much as to drain the whole creek. Then the owner of the creek, the jacaré (Caiman niger) came and asked him to leave at least some for himself, but, because of his thirst, the boy drank it all. The jacaré got angry and scolded.

The jaguar took the boy home and gave him roast meat to eat, for in his house he had fire. A long tree trunk was lying there, burning at one end. "Why do you bring such a lean and ugly boy?" the jaguar's wife asked her husband. Then he went hunting, leaving the boy with her. When the jaguar had gone, the woman called the boy to louse her. But when she had him between her paws she began to growl. Then the boy screamed for fear, but she said she was only joking. When the jaguar came home, however, the boy at once told him that the woman had scared him, and the jaguar scolded her for it.

¹ Cf. Curt Nimuendajú, *The Apinayé* (The Catholic University of America, Anthropological Series 8, Washington, D. C., 1939) 154.

Now the boy remained with the jaguars and grew fat. The jaguar made him a bow and arrows and ornaments. Then he helped him return to his tribe. Taking two basketfuls of roast meat, he carried them near the boy's aldeia (village) where he hid them. Then he himself led the boy away. In the woods he instructed him, saying that if his wife should pursue him he was to climb a tree and thence shoot at her carotid. Thus it happened. When the boy saw the jaguar woman coming, he hurriedly climbed a tree. She ordered him to come down, but he refused. Then she tried to climb the tree and seize him, but he shot an arrow through her neck. She toppled over and died. He then climbed down and went on to the spot where the jaguar had concealed the two baskets with roast meat.

While still standing there, he heard people coming. It was his two brothers passing by. He called out to them and inquired for their mother. Then the two ran home to report they had met their dead brother. "You lie," said their mother, "he's been dead long since." However, she went with them to the spot, but the boy had again concealed himself. But when the aikmā funeral festival² was being celebrated, he again appeared to his brothers, who now took him to their mother. She wept and took him along.

Then he had them fetch the two baskets with roast meat. When the people saw it, they asked, "Why, how is it roasted?" "In the sunshine," said the boy. "Was it not roasted by means of fire, perchance?" they asked the mother. She, however, merely told them to ask the boy. The people cross-examined him then, but he kept repeating that it had been roasted in the sun. At last his uncle questioned him by himself, and to him the boy now confessed the truth about the burning tree in the jaguar's house.

Then all the Indians gathered together to take away the whole of the jaguar's log and bring it to the village. When the jaguar heard the crowd approaching, he retreated. The mutum (Mitua mitu) and the water-fowl, both good runners, seized the trunk and ran off with it, but the jacú (Penelope marail) pecked up the scattered embers, whence its red crop. Thus fire came into the Indians' village.

2. *Sun and Moon (Waptokwá and Wáirie)*³

Origin of Manioc. Waptokwá and Wáirie⁴ were still nurslings when their mothers took them along to their plantations. While the infants were sleeping, the women decided to gather burity fruits. Having laid down the two children, they went to the woods along the river bank. After they had spent a long time gathering fruits, they said, "Let us now go quickly to our children, they are probably crying by now!" So the two women ran back to their infants as fast as they could. Their breasts were full of milk, which trickled on the ground as they swiftly ran through the plantation. Out of each drop from the breasts of Waptokwá's mother there sprouted a bitter manioc plant; wherever a drop of Wáirie's mother's milk fell to the ground a sweet manioc plant sprouted.

² Curt Nimuendajú, *The Šerente* (Publications of the Frederick Webb Hodge Anniversary Publication Fund 4, Los Angeles, 1942) 100.

³ Cf. Curt Nimuendajú, *The Apinayé*, 158; id., *The Šerente*, 84 f.

⁴ Note that these are not the ordinary words for sun and moon.

Capture of Arrows. Waptokwá called Wáirie his "comrade." Once they were both standing by the river near an Indian village. "Shall we turn into fish?" Waptokwá proposed to his comrade. "Yes," was the answer. "Then let me fetch jatobá bark, and do you fetch copahiba bark." With the bark of these trees they worked magic and then jumped into the water. Thus they turned into fish. They swam down to the village water pool. Soon a woman came to the bank; seeing the two big fish, she hurriedly ran back, shouting at the men to come with their arrows and kill them. All the men of the village came at once and discharged one arrow after another at the two. All the missiles remained sticking in the fish, which were studded with arrows. When the men had discharged their last arrow, the two herces rooted up all the mud and escaped in the roiled water. Then they turned into human shape again. Making two thick sheaves of the arrows, they went into the village. There the people said, "Why did you not come sooner with your many arrows? You might have helped us kill the two big fish that were at the water-hole." "It is really a pity," answered the two, "we probably should have had arrows enough!"

Begging. Waptokwá and Wáirie had been in the sariema (*Cariama cristata*) village and seen whole basketfuls of roasted içá (swarming ant females, *Atta cephalotes*). They waited by the village road till a woman came, then both turned into women and begged her to bring them içá. She brought them a whole basketful, then went away. Then a boy approached, and at once they transformed themselves into boys and begged içá of him, again receiving a basketful. Thus they begged in turn of every one who came along, assuming the shape of persons of every age and either sex, and before the sariema knew how it had happened, they had parted with their entire supply of ants.

Moon-spots. Waptokwá and Wáirie had gathered ostrich eggs. Waptokwá roasted them in the ashes and opened one. When Wáirie saw the fine yellow yolk, he asked Waptokwá how he had opened the egg. Waptokwá lied, saying he had knocked it against his belly. So Wáirie took a hot ostrich egg and struck it against his belly, so that it cracked, the hot contents scalding his skin. Thence the moon has a spotted belly.

Red Droppings. Waptokwá had eaten burity fruits and his faeces had become red. The red faeces greatly pleased Wáirie. He wanted his own to be the same and asked his comrade how this had come to be so. Waptokwá told him, and Wáirie now went at once also to eat burity fruits. But he ate only unripe ones, and much to his vexation his faeces turned black. At least Waptokwá showed him where there were ripe burity fruits. Wáirie ate thereof and was now satisfied with the result.

Origin of Animals. In the days of Waptokwá all animals were still human. Consequently there was no hunting and men ate one another. One day somebody in the Indian village cried "There comes Waptokwá!" When he entered, the people offered him roast human flesh. He ate of it, but was vexed. Then he summoned all the people. It took four days to get them all together. Finally, when no one was lacking, he said, "Tomorrow I'll depart. I shall walk right through your midst, and you shall remain behind!" He acted accordingly on the following day. He bade the assembled crowd to leave a path free in

their midst, and walked between the lines. Then all on one side of him were transformed into animals, but those on the other side remained human. Since then the latter no longer eat human flesh, but hunt game animals.

Departure. Waptokwá and Wáirie thereupon left for the east. There they are said to have climbed a bacaba palm on the summit of a mountain range. Waptokwá struck the trunk of a tree, which grew to the sky, where Waptokwá and Wáirie still are today.

3. *Jupiter*⁵ (*Wasi-topré*)

In the bachelors' hut the lads were lying together one evening talking. One of them looked up to the sky and said, "How beautiful is that star!" At night when everyone was asleep the star Jupiter came down in the shape of a girl, saying, "Why, you said I was pretty; here I am!" They lay together without being observed by anyone.

Before daylight the youth hid the star in a gourd bottle, which he suspended from the wall. Before going hunting he admonished his companions, who were staying behind, not to touch the bottle. But of course for that very reason they did so, and when they opened the vessel they saw the girl inside, who at once disappeared.

At night, however, she returned to her lover and told him her "brothers-in-law" had not let her alone. She invited him to accompany her to the sky and they set the time of the journey for the next night. They ascended a mountain on which a bacaba palm was growing and climbed to the top. Then Jupiter caused the tree to grow till it reached the sky, where she tied the fronds to another tree standing there. But up there the young man found everything different from its equivalent on the earth and not at all to his taste. Everywhere he saw smoked and roasted human flesh; and when bathing he saw horribly mutilated shapes with open body cavities. Accordingly, when Jupiter asked him to wait a little while she went to dig up sweet-potatoes, he decided to flee. He ran to the bacaba, mounted it, and untied it. While he was about to glide down, Jupiter came and cried, "Why are you leaving me? But wait and see, you'll come back anyway!"

The young man got back to the earth in safety and told about his visit to the sky, but soon after he died and his soul went back to Jupiter and now he is a star beside her in the nocturnal heavens.

4. *Maize*

A woman was sitting with her child by the village pool and plaiting a trap to catch acary fish. Then a rat in human guise came to her and began talking, "What are you living on?" he asked. "On rotten wood," answered the woman, for then the Šerénte had no cultivated plants. "Then take your child and come to me for a meal," the rat invited her, "but manage it so as not to let any one see you and don't tell anyone about it." The woman accepted the invitation, and they got to the rat's residence, where there were quantities of maize. The woman and her child ate of all possible maize dishes, and when she left in the evening the rat allowed her to take along all she wanted. So she took along a flat-cake.

⁵ Cf. Curt Nimuendajú, *The Apinayé* 165; id., *The Šerente*, 85, 88, 91.

In the village she gave a piece of it to her child. As the little one was running around with the food in his hand, an old man saw him and begged, "Grandson, give me some of it, too!" So the boy gave him a little piece and also distributed pieces among others. But after eating, the old man went to the mother and asked what sort of a dish it was. "Nothing special at all," answered the woman, "it was the leafy sprouts of the paty palm!" "No," said the old man, "that cannot be, for they are bitter, but that dish was sweet." So at last she divulged that the rat had given her maize.

At once all the villagers got together and marched to the site where the woman reported maize from. When the owner of the maize heard the people come, he transformed himself into a rat and fled, leaving his plantation for the *Serente*.

5. *Asaré*

Once there was an Indian who had a wife and many sons, all of them adult except the youngest, *Asaré*. While the father was hunting one day, the young lads who were in the bachelors' hut hatched an evil plot. They sent *Asaré* to his mother, bidding her come to cut their hair and decorate them. But when she entered, her own sons seized and ravished her.

As soon as the old man came home, *Asaré* told him what had occurred. Infuriated, he thrashed his sons severely. Then they decided to kill him. They set fire to the hut where the couple were living, but their parents turned into falcons of the kind that like to fly in the smoke, and thus escaped.

Then the sons went far away. On the way *Asaré* got so thirsty that he could not go on. His brothers knocked tucum nuts open for him so he might quench his thirst with the water in them, but it did not suffice. Then one of them began digging a well in a hollow. At once such quantities of water came pouring forth that *Asaré*, however much his brothers urged him to drink, could not exhaust it. The water spread more and more, finally forming the sea (*kieporé*).

Then *Asaré* suddenly recollected that an arrow he particularly prized had been left on the opposite bank. "I must fetch it!" he said, jumped into the water, and swam across. When he had found his arrow, he prepared to swim back. In the middle of the water he found a *jacaré*. It had developed out of a swarm of lizards *Asaré* had killed while traveling and which the spreading waters had carried away. "Grandfather," said *Asaré* to the *jacaré*, "let me sit on you!" "No," answered he, "that won't do." Then *Asaré* called him names, making fun of his ugly nose. Then he dived and swam on. The *jacaré* gave chase, but *Asaré's* arrow drifted along on the water; his brothers noticing it supposed that he had perished, and no longer waited for him, but marched on.

Asaré reached land when his pursuer was already close behind. The boy ran into the woods and got to a spot where the woodpeckers were pecking the bark from the trees in order to eat the insects under it. He begged the birds to hide him, and they covered him with strips of bark. When the *jacaré* came and inquired for the boy, the woodpeckers lied, assuring him that nobody had passed by, but that somebody had been heard shouting in the woods on the other side. The *jacaré* went to search there, and the boy came out and moved on.

He reached a second river, jumped in, and swam to the opposite bank, but here also he met a jacaré who refused to be his mount. Asaré called him names and was pursued, but at the bank the partridges, who happened to be engaged in digging out manduvi (*Arachis hypogaea*), hid him under the straw till the danger was past.

In the third river the same thing happened. This time monkeys who were eating jatobá fruits hid him under the rinds. When the jacaré came to inquire for the fugitive, one of the monkeys from inborn talkativeness came near divulging the secret, but another struck him on the lips, so he kept silent.

Now Asaré fled on, getting to his uncle, the skunk, pkozé (*Mephitis suffocans*). He was not afraid at all, but told him to stay there and be calm, no matter whether the jacaré came. When he did come to seize the boy, the skunk squirted his fluid at him, and the jacaré died of the stench. Then the skunk called the little inambus (*Tinamus* sp.) to drag the corpse into the river. Asaré, however, stayed with his uncle.

When the sea was formed, Asaré's brothers had at once tried to bathe. Even today, toward the close of the rainy season, one hears in the west the sound of their splashing in the water. Then they appear in the heavens, new and clean as Sururu, the Seven Stars.

6. *The Origin of Women*

In the beginning there were no women, only men. These practiced homosexual intercourse. One of them became pregnant as a result, but was unable to give birth and died.

Once several men reaching a spring saw in it the reflection of a woman who was sitting high up in the branches of a tree that was standing beside the water. They mistook the reflection for reality and for two days vainly tried to grasp it. At last one of them looked up and espied the woman at the top of the tree. They brought her down and since each wanted to have her, they cut her into little pieces, each wrapping one of them up in a leaf and sticking it into the grass wall of his house. Then all went hunting.

When they got home they sent a messenger ahead, who entered and found that the pieces of flesh had all turned into women. The suaçurana (*Felis concolor*, puma), who had taken a piece from the chest, thereby got a very pretty wife. The sariema, on the other hand, who had twisted his slice too tight, got a very lean woman. But each man now had a wife, and the very next time they went hunting they took their wives along.

7. *The Cannibal*

In a village there was a man named Amkí. He was much stronger than all the rest; no one dared pick a quarrel with him.

One day he was sitting in his house, hungry. He considered how he might secure some food. At last he called together all the boys in the village and invited them to accompany him into the woods where he had tethered a big sucurijú (*Eunectes murinus*, anaconda). The boys prepared for the next day, each taking a little basket with manioc flat-cakes to season the snake feast. Amkí led them into the woods, where he told them to gather firewood

and kindle a fire. When it was burning well, he took a rope he had brought and tied all the boys' feet together. He said that he was obliged to do that in order properly to count them so that each might get his share of the *sucurijú*. But when all were tied together, he threw them jointly into the fire and then covered them with earth. After having sufficiently baked them, he took off the earth and devoured his victims. One slice he took home for his wife.

When he got back to the village, people asked where he had left the boys. He answered that they had gone home earlier than he himself and ought to be there by now. But one man followed the tracks into the woods; there he found the place where the boys had been cooked, and also their bones. Then he returned and told the parents about what Amkí had done. The mothers secretly shed tears, but no one allowed Amkí to notice that his crime had been discovered. The men deliberated how to kill him, but no one could muster enough courage to attack him.

At last they sent a messenger to invite him to the bachelors' hut to tell stories. But Amkí was suspicious and excused himself on the plea of illness. Then they invited him on the following day to take part in a tapir hunt, and now Amkí came to the bachelors' house and sat among the rest, who had already prepared. Before he knew what they were about, one of them shot him in the back, and at once the rest pounced upon him with their clubs and killed him. Then they cut open the cannibal's body, and out of his abdominal cavity came flying a swarm of bats.

8. *Anaconda (Sucurijú) and his Sons-in-Law*

Anaconda (*Eunectes murinus*, *sucurijú*) had four sons-in-law: Puma (*sua-curana*; *Felis concolor*); Black Arára (*Anodorhynchus hyacinthinus*); Caburé (*Scops brasiliiana*; a little horned owl); and Owl (*Pulsatrix perspicillata*). Anaconda had not made a clearing for his wife, so that every day she had to go round to her sons-in-law, begging food of them. She especially liked to go to Puma, because he was an excellent deer hunter. One day, however, the sons-in-law grew tired of this procedure, so they sent the old woman home without gifts. "Just wait," said Anaconda when he learned of the conduct of his sons-in-law, "you'll have to come to me some day to beg food!" For, unknown to anybody, he had made a clearing by crawling below the surface of the earth, breaking off the roots of the trees with his back, so that the trees toppled down. He called his sons-in-law together to help burn over his clearing. "What?" said they, "where has *he* a clearing?" They were greatly astonished when they got there and saw the large clearing. They set fire to it, and as soon as it was kindled, Caburé and Owl turned into the birds, for they were lazy and slept all day. Only Puma and Black Arára came home. But Anaconda decided to punish them, too. He took his magic wand (*dazuudíe*), with which he transferred all the fruits in the plantations of his sons-in-law to his own. When they got to their field, the maize had remained low and would not grow again. Now they had to go to their father-in-law and beg food of him.

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