

The story of Haburi

A Guiana Myth

1922 & 1973

Long ago, there were two sisters minding themselves, for they had no man to look after them. So they were very puzzled to discover one day that starch of the palm tree, ité (*Mauritia*), they had felled the evening before was all ready prepared. Next day the same thing happened, and then it happened again and often so they decided to keep watch. About the middle of the night they saw a manicole palm tree (*Euterpe*) bend gradually over until it touched the cut they had made in the trunk of the ité tree. Both sisters rushed up and caught hold of it, begging it earnestly to turn into a man. It refused at first but, as they begged so earnestly, it did so. He became the husband of the elder of the two sisters and by and by she gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, whom she called Haburi.

The two women had their hunting-ground near two ponds; one of these ponds belonged to them, and so they used to fish there. The other belonged to Jaguar,¹ and they advised the man not to go near it. He did so nevertheless, because the jaguar's pond contained more fish than theirs. But Jaguar came along and, in order to be revenged, he killed the thief. He then took the husband's shape and returned to the spot where the two women were camped. It was almost dark. Jaguar was carrying his victim's basket, which contained the stolen fish. In a coarse, rough voice which surprised the sisters, the false husband told them they could cook the fish and eat it, but that he himself was too tired to share their meal. All he wanted was to sleep, while he nursed Haburi. They brought the child to him and, while the women were eating their dinner, he started to snore so loudly that he could be heard on the other side of the river. Several times in his sleep, he uttered the name of the man he had killed and whom he was pretending to impersonate. The dead man was called Mayarakóto. This made the women anxious and they suspected some act of treachery. 'Our husband never snored like that,' they said, 'and he never called his own name before.' They gently removed Haburi from the arms of the sleeper, slipping in a bundle of bark in his place. They quickly made off with him, taking with them a wax light and a bundle of firewood.

While going along, they heard Wau-uta, who at that time was a witch, singing and accompanying her song with her ceremonial rattle. The women went on and on, quickly too, for they knew that, once they arrived at Wau-uta's place, they would be safe. In the meantime the jaguar had woken up. When he found himself alone, holding a bundle of bark in his arms instead of a baby boy, he became extremely angry. He changed back into his animal shape and hurried after the fugitives. The women heard him coming and hurried still more. Finally they knocked at Wau-uta's door. 'Who is there?' - 'It is us, the two sisters.' But Wau-uta would not open the door. So the mother pinched Haburi's ears to make him cry. Wau-uta, her curiosity aroused, asked: 'What child is that? Is it a girl or a boy?' 'It is a boy, my Haburi', replied the mother and Wau-uta opened the door immediately and asked them to come in.

¹ In Roth, the animal is referred to as Tiger, which the author has translated into French as Jaguar.

When the jaguar arrived, Wau-uta told him she had seen no one, but the beast knew by the scent that she was telling a lie. Wau-uta suggested he should find out for himself by poking his head through the half-open door. The door was covered with thorns, and as soon as Jaguar put his head in, the old woman closed it and killed him. But the sisters began to grieve for their dead husband and cried so much that Wau-uta told them to go and gather manioc in the plantation and make beer, so that they could drown their sorrow. They wanted to take Haburi, but Wau-uta insisted that there was no point in doing so and that she would take care of him.

While the sisters were in the fields, Wau-uta made the child grow by magic into a youth. She gave him a flute and some arrows. On their way back from the plantation, the women were surprised to hear music being played, for they did not remember there being a man in the house when they left. And though ashamed, they went in and saw a young man playing the flute. They asked after Haburi but Wau-uta maintained that the child had run after them as soon as they had left for the field and that she thought he was with them. All this was a lie, because she had made Haburi grow up with the intention of making him her lover. She still further deceived the two sisters by pretending to take part in the search for the little boy, having previously ordered Haburi to say she was his mother, and given him full directions as to how he must treat her.

Haburi was a splendid shot: no bird could escape his arrow, and Wau-uta directed him to give her all the big birds he killed and to give his mother and his aunt all the little ones which he had to pollute first by fouling them. The object of this was to make the sisters so vexed and angry that they would leave the place. But this they would not do: they continued searching for their little child. This sort of thing went on for many days; big birds and dirtied little birds being presented by Haburi to Wau-uta and the two women, respectively.

One day, however, Haburi did miss a bird for the first time, his arrow sticking into a branch overhanging a creek where the otters,² the hunter's uncles, used to come and feed. It was a nice, cleared spot and here Haburi eased himself, taking care to cover up the dung with leaves. Then he climbed the tree to dislodge the arrow. Just then the otters arrived and, scenting the air, they at once suspected that their worthless nephew must be somewhere about. They discovered him on the tree branch and ordered him to come down and sit, when they would tell him a few home truths: he was leading a bad life, the old woman was not his mother, and the two younger ones were his mother and aunt respectively. They impressed upon him that it was wicked of him to divide the birds unfairly. He must do exactly the opposite, giving his real mother, the elder of the two sisters, the larger birds and tell her he was sorry and apologize for his wickedness which was due entirely to ignorance on his part.

So Haburi made a clean breast of it to his mother and gave the dirtied little birds to Wau-uta. The latter worked herself into a great passion, told Haburi that he must

² Roth has water-dogs, which the author has translated as otters.

be mad and blew in his face [in order to drive out the evil spirits, cf. Roth i, p. 164]; so angered and upset was she that she could eat nothing at all. All through the night she nagged Haburi. But the next morning, the latter again gave the big birds he had shot to his real mother and the dirtied little ones to Wau-uta who gave him no peace. Haburi therefore made up his mind to get out with his mother and aunt.

Haburi built a canoe from bees' wax, but by next morning a black duck had taken it away. He made another little clay canoe, which was stolen by another kind of duck. In the meantime he cut a large field and cleared it so quickly that the women could grow enough manioc for their proposed journey. Haburi would often slip away and make a boat, always with different kinds of wood and of varying shapes, but just as regularly a different species of duck would come and steal them. The last one he made was from the silk-cotton tree and this particular one was not stolen. Thus it was Haburi who first made a boat and who taught ducks to float on the surface of the water, because it was with his boats that they managed to do so. 'Indeed,' the informant comments, 'we Warao say that each duck has its own particular kind of boat.'

What was even more curious was that the next morning the last boat was found to be bigger than it was the night before. Haburi told his mother and her sister to collect all the provisions and put them aboard, while he continued to plant manioc cuttings along with Wau-uta. At the first opportunity, he slipped secretly back to the house, took his axe and his arrows and proceeded down to the waterside, having previously ordered the posts not to talk, for in those days the posts of a house could speak and, if the owner of the house were absent, a visitor could thus find out his whereabouts. Unfortunately Haburi forgot to warn the parrot in the house to keep silent, and when Wau-uta returned, the bird told her which way Haburi had gone.

Wau-uta rushed down to the landing and arrived just in time to see Haburi stepping into the boat to join his mother and aunt. The old woman seized hold of the craft screaming: 'My son! My son I You must not leave me! I am your mother!' and she refused to let go her hold, although they all repeatedly struck her fingers with the paddles and almost smashed them to pieces on the gunwale. So poor Haburi had perforce to land again and, with old Wau-uta, proceeded to a large hollow tree, where bees had built their nest. Haburi made a small hole in the trunk with his axe and told the old woman to go inside and suck the honey. As it happened, she was mad about honey and, although crying very hard at the thought of losing Haburi, she crawled through the little opening, which the latter immediately closed in upon her. And there she is to be found to the present day, the Wau-uta frog, which is heard only in hollow trees. And if you look carefully, you will see how swollen her fingers are from the way in which they were bashed by the paddles when she tried to hold on to the gunwale. If you listen you can also hear her lamenting for her lost lover: Wang! Wang! Wang!

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Richard Schomburgk's Travels in British Guiana, 1840-1844.
<archive.org/details/richardschomburg01schouoft>. With two minor clarifying
language edits by Claude Lévi-Strauss:
<archive.org/details/fromhoneytoashes00lvrich>

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