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THREE GHONTAL STORIES

Translated by Kathryn Keller

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INTRODUCTION

The following stories are a free English translation of three animal stories from the tales of the Chontal Indians of Tabasco, Mexico, a branch of the Mayans numbering about 16,500. They are representative of a great number of tales, handed down by word of mouth and varying somewhat from speaker to speaker. The usual setting for the telling of the tales is wakes, and since only men attend, the men are more familiar with the stories than the women.

Since I am not acquainted with Spanish literature, I cannot tell if these stories are purely native. My informant for this material was Zenon Luciano, a young Chontal Indian of about twenty four years of age.

A - THE ANT

Once upon a time there was an ant who lived in her house alone. Every day she swept the house. One day she found a small coin, and she said, "What shall I buy with this money?"

She couldn't think of something to buy, for she reasoned, "If I buy candy, I'll eat it all and there won't be anything left. If I buy bread, I'll eat that all too. If I buy a tamale, I'll eat that too." She couldn't think of a thing to buy.

Then she thought, "Good! I'll buy a red hair ribbon. This will last a long time." This is just what she bought. Every day before she swept the floor she caught up her hair with her red hair ribbon.

One day as she was sitting in the doorway a dog came along and said, "You're verry pretty, little ant, with your hair ribbon. Wouldn't you like to marry me?"

"How will you talk to me?" asked the ant.

The dog barked, "Woh, woh, woh."

"I don't want to marry you because you scare me," said the ant.

One day after that a cow came and spoke to the ant just like the dog had. The ant asked the cow, "How are you going to talk to me?"

The cow went "Mu mu."

The ant said, "I don't want to marry you. You frighten me. Your voice is loud."

After this a lot of animals came, and finally a rat. He said, "You're very pretty, little ant, with your hair ribbon. Do you want to marry me?"

The ant asked, "How are you going to talk to me?"

"I,i,i," went the rat.

The ant liked his voice very much. She said, "Yes, I'll marry you."

They were married. Every day the ant went to the church, and the rat stayed at home to make something to eat. One day, early in the morning, the ant put beans on the fire. Then she went to church just like she always did. She told her husband, "You stay here and stir the food."

"Allright," replied the rat. After the ant left he closed the door. He stirred the beans with the long-handled spoon. Then he said to himself, "I'm going to see if they are done." He came near the pot to get a few Beans out, and as he did so he fell into the pot headfirst and died.

Then the ant came home. She called at the door and no one answered. "He's fast asleep," she thought. She opened the door, went in, and saw the rat in the pot of beans, dead.

The ant cried because her husband had died. Many friends came to the wake. They went to bury the rat. They saw how the ant was crying and they cried too, wailing out, "Ay, ay, the rat, husband of the ant died in the pot of beans."

When the ant returned to her house they told her, "Don't you cry. We'll stay with you and keep you company."

Once upon a time there was a man who lived with his wife , two children, and many animals. They had a dog, goats, turkeys, chickens, pigs, and a rooster with a lot of brains. They also had a cow, ducks, and a horse.

One night the man told his wife, "Tomorrow we'll eat a hen." The rooster heard because he slept under the bed, and this conversation took place above, under the mosquito net.

Early in the morning the rooster cried, "Ki kiri ki. Get up my friends, for today we are going to be eaten." They left and didn't wait to be fed.

At night the animals came back and went to sleep under the bed. That night the man was talking to his wife and said, "This morning we didn't eat the hen. Tomorrow we'll eat a turkey."

The rooster heard again like he did before. He spoke to the turkeys, "Do you know what's going to happen?"

The turkeys said, "We don't know."

"Tomorrow you are going to be eaten. Early in the morning when I crow, let's get away from here so that you won't be eaten."

"All right," replied the turkeys.

The next day, early in the morning the rooster called out again, "Ki kiri ki. Get up my friends."

Again they went away, without waiting to be fed. At night they returned and went to sleep. None of the animals heard anything because they were asleep--none except the rooster. He heard , like he did before, what the man said to his wife, "This morning we didn't eat the turkey. Tomorrow you catch a duck."

The rooster spoke to the ducks, "You get up, you who are

sleeping, for tomorrow you are going to be eaten. Early in the morning I'll call you so that we can go again."

"All right," the ducks answered.

The next morning, early, the rooster called again, "Ki kiri ki. Get up my friends." They went, and again returned at night. They came into the house and went to sleep under the bed.

The rooster heard again what his owner said, "This morning we didn't eat the duck. What would you like to eat tomorrow?"

The woman said, "Tomorrow you kill a goat."

"All right," answered the man.

The rooster spoke to the goats, "Friends, do you know what's going to happen?"

They answered, "We don't know."

"I heard our owner say that tomorrow one of you will be eaten. Early in the morning I'll call you and you follow us on a long journey so that you won't be found."

The goats said, "All right."

The next day earlier than before the rooster crowed, calling the animals, "Ki kiri ki. Get up my friends." They all heard, got up, and went far away just like the rooster told them to.

That night they returned and went to sleep under the bed. The rooster heard again what the man said, "I don't believe that every day early in the morning all our animals leave, and we don't have one to eat. Why they come back, I don't know. They're lazy wanderers."

His wife replied, "These animals do this because of the rooster. He gets up early and I think this is why they all leave--following him. It would be better to eat the rooster tomorrow."

"All right then," said the man. This conversation they had in the early morning.

The rooster heard and laughed, "ha ha! Today you're going to eat me. Get up my friends." They left, and he told the animals, "Let's go far away."

They returned that night and went to sleep under the bed. The rooster heard his owner say to his wife the following, "Why our animals act like this I don't know. It's better to sell them all, and not keep any. We'll go to another town. Sunday we'll eat the rooster. We'll catch him ahead of time, Saturday evening, so he can't leave the next day."

Poor rooster! But he heard again, just like he always did. The next day the animals left early in the morning. At noon they came to the edge of a river and all took a good drink. They gathered around in the shade. The cow and the horse were there too, and the rooster spoke to them, "Do you know what's going to happen?"

"We don't know," they replied.

"I heard our owner say he was going to sell the horse. You'll be made uncomfortable under a heavy load. You'll never be free to run where you want to go. And cow, you are going to be sold to a butcher. Poor thing, you are going to die. And you, what are you going to do about it?"

They asked the rooster.

He replied, "Tomorrow we will leave; all of us will change our dwelling place. You, if you don't want to be sold, come along tomorrow."

They said, "All right."

"Tomorrow morning early I'm going to get you," continued the rooster.

"All right," they answered.

The next day, before dawn, the rooster crowed under the bed of his owner, "Goodbye, my owner. May God be with you."

However, the man didn't hear; now could he understand.

Waking up, the man heard the noise of the animals and said, "A thief has entered."

The rooster cried again, "Goodbye, my owner." They left. They met up with the horse and cow and took them along.

The rooster spoke to the dog too, "Do you want to help us get away? Our owner will see that we aren't here. He'll be cross. He will say, 'Why is there a dog here when he didn't bite the thief', and he will kill you.

"I'll go too then, with you," said the dog.

They went far away, until they came to a big forest. There was there, underground, a house which belonged to the animals of the wood. The rooster crowed, and called to his friends, "We're all going to cry out and make a big noise, so that the owner of this house will hear and flee. Then we can stay here and this house will be ours."

All answered, "yes."

Then all came near and cried out. First the rooster called, "Ki kiri ki, Get out of here." All the rest cried out too. The horse cried out; the cow cried out; all that were there cried out.

The animals of the wood heard and said to each other, "Let's flee. The world is coming to an end. Never have we heard anything like this." They all fled.

The new arrivals cried out more than before,

They went into their house, their new house. The next day they said, "We need a ruler, so that everything will go well with us."

All said, "Our ruler is the rooster."

The rooster assented, "All right. Now you obey what I say."

"yes," they all said.

"My helper and messenger," continued the rooster, "is this other little rooster."

The next day the rooster said, "Now I'm ruler, and I'm not going to leave the house. Each day one of you will have to bring me something to eat. Whoever doesn't obey, I say that one should die."

All the animals were afraid because their ruler was cross. Every day they brought him his food. One day he called them all together and told them, "Every day you must come--morning, afternoon, and evening--to take me for a ride, lifted up on your shoulders, by the side of this river."

They said, "All right, then."

After this the little rooster said, "Why should we give ourselves to do a thing like this. If you want me for a ruler, let's rise up against this ruler, because he wants too much. We'll put an end to him."

All said "all right", but they were afraid.

The little rooster said, "Don't be afraid. We're all going to die some day anyway."

One night at midnight he cried out, "Ki kiri ki. Today we are all going to rebel against our ruler." This is just what the animals did.

The little rooster got in front and cried out, "Ki kiri ki."

The turkey answered, "Lok, lok, lok."

The duck answered, "Pas, pas."

The dog too helped, "Woh, woh, woh."

The goat also went, "ooo?"

Also the pig helped, calling "feh, feh, feh."

The ruler heard and went running. He ran to the little rooster and caught hold of him, but all the animals helped the little rooster. The ruler fled to the forest, where the animals of the wood had gone. This is the way they put the ruler out of office. Then all the animals cried out.

The little rooster became the ruler. He crowed "Ki kiri ki. The wicked one has come to his end. Now we shall all go hunt our own food. I am the ruler but you don't have to bring me my food."

All said, "That's not right. You must have your food like a ruler. We'll give it to you because you take care of us. Don't let the exile return."

All said, "All right," and they all lived happily ever after.

C- THE FOX AND THE TIGER

There was an old tiger who lived with his wife, the tigress. Nearby was the house of a *fox, and also nearby was the house of an armadillo. The tiger started to make a cornfield. When he finished getting the ground ready, he said to his wife, "Tomorrow I'm going to plant my cornfield. I must look for a friend to help me plant the field."

The tigress said, "Allright."

The old tiger went to speak to his workers. He first asked the fox and then he asked the armadillo. They answered, "Allright."

The next day the workers went to work, and the tigress stayed in the house to grind the corn drink and to make candy for them. They got to the field and began work. Others arrived to help. Many of the inhabitants of the wood came to help.

Later the tiger said, "I need my corn drink. I'll go get it."

"I'll go, grandfather," spoke up the fox. "I'll get your corn drink. Let the armadillo go, too, to help me, and you rest here. I don't want you to have to walk."

"All right, then, my child," answered the tiger.

They left to get the corn drink, and when they arrived at the house, the fox told the tigress what they had come for, and said, "Also, grandmother, send something to eat."

"What did he say I should send?" asked the tigress.

The fox replied, "He said, grandmother, that you should

* The Chontal word used here seems to indicate a certain group of small carnivorous animals.

kill the turkey hen and cook her with all the eggs."

The tigress heard and did exactly that. The fox and armadillo waited until it was finished and then set out with the food. The fox found a shady place along the road and sat down to enjoy eating the turkey. It is difficult for an armadillo to eat meat because his mouth is small. "Wait for me," said the fox.

When the fox finished eating the turkey, he began on the eggs. "Do you want some, brother armadillo?" he asked.

"I can't eat them," said the armadillo.

"Come here," ordered the fox. "I'll put them in your mouth." He took an egg, broke it, caught the mouth of the armadillo, and smeared the egg all over his mouth and nose.

When the fox finished eating, he said to the armadillo, "I'm not going to take the corn drink to the tiger."

"I'm not going either," said the armadillo. They both went to their houses.

The old tiger waited for those bringing the corn drink, and they didn't arrive. He looked for them, but couldn't see them. He went to his house to get his corn drink himself, for he had worked and was hungry.

When he arrived, he was angry with the tigress. "Why are you angry," asked the tigress. This morning I sent you your corn drink and even your dinner."

"Why did you do that?" asked the tiger.

The tigress said, "You sent the fox with the armadillo to get it."

The tiger went back to the field with his corn drink, and finished the work. When he returned home, he said to the tigress,

"Put water on the fire to boil. I'm going to get the armadillo for us to eat."

"All right," answered the tigress.

The tiger went to the armadillo's house. Arriving, he called, "What are you doing, armadillo?"

Very frightened when he heard the voice of the tiger, he answered with great fear, "Nothing, grandfather."

The tiger said, "Come here, I want to have a word with you." He caught the poor armadillo.

The armadillo started to cry, saying, "I'm not the one, grandfather, that ate your turkey. The fox ate it."

"Why then are your mouth and nose smeared all over?" asked the tiger.

"The fox took advantage of me and painted my face."

"You're a liar," thundered the tiger. "You both ate my turkey." He wrung his neck and killed the armadillo. He took him home to enjoy eating him.

When they finished eating, the tiger said, "Now wife, we have the fox left to eat."

The next day he went to the house of the fox, but the fox was smart. He knew what the tiger came to say.

"Hello, fox," called out the tiger.

In a high-pitched squeaky voice the fox answered, "Hello, grandfather. I'm sick."

"You're a liar," thundered the tiger. "You ate my turkey."

Again the fox said, "When did I eat your turkey? I've been sick for a long time."

"You're a liar! I'm going to kill you now."

The fox laughed, "Hi hi hi. All right then, grandfather."

"Why are you laughing?" asked the tiger.

"I'm laughing at you, grandfather. You don't have any brains."

"Why?"

The fox replied, "You just don't. You said you were going to kill me here. That's fine, for if I die in my house, my spirit will stay right here in the house, and all my blood will remain here too. If you took me alive, I would be worse off, because I wouldn't be able to die in my own house."

"Is that true?" asked the tiger. "Come on, then, alive, so that grandmother tiger can enjoy her drink of your blood."

The fox began to pretend he was crying. Seeing him, the tiger said, "Don't cry."

"I'm not crying because you are going to kill me," quickly responded the fox.

"Why then?" asked the tiger.

"I'm crying because of my two chickens. They went off and I didn't know that you were coming to get me. If I had known, I would have caught my chickens early this morning so that I and my chickens could die together."

The tiger listened, and said, "Why don't you catch them then. I'll help you."

"Don't you go to catch them, grandfather. When the chickens see you they'll flee because they will think you are going to eat them. They're not used to seeing you. If I go alone, they won't flee."

"You go along then," answered the tiger. "Catch them. I'll wait for you."

The fox left, saying, "Wait for me, grandfather. It will take me a long time to catch them because I'm sick."

"All right,"

The fox left the house, groaning. He went slowly until he got to the weeds, and then ran away with all his might. The tiger waited. He looked for the fox but couldn't see him. Then he went to hunt him, sniffing the ground to follow his trail.

Meantime the fox thought over what he would do next. He climbed up into a tree.

Arriving at the foot of the tree, the tiger called out, "Why did you flee?"

"What happened, grandfather?" innocently asked the fox.

"You ate my turkey!"

"Not me," said the fox. "I don't know who did. I've been here taking care of this tree I planted so that no one will steal the fruit. Do you want to taste one of these sapotes? They're very sweet."

"Give me one then," said the tiger.

The fox called down, "Open your mouth." He threw down a ripe one.

Then he asked, "How did it taste, grandfather?"

"Very sweet. I want another one," said the tiger.

"Open your mouth wide." The tiger heard and opened his mouth.

"Wider, grandfather," said the fox. "This one is very large."

The tiger heard and obeyed. The fox hunted a big sapote, not yet ripe. He threw it with all his might into the tiger's mouth.

It went down into his throat and stuck there. The tiger cried out, and fell to the ground, rolling with pain.

The fox fled again, and wondered what he would do this time.

The tiger meantime got the sapote out of his throat.

The fox climbed up into a royal palm tree. Then the tiger arrived and spoke to the fox again.

"Quiet, grandfather. Don't talk loud, so God can't hear us," whispered the fox.

"You're a liar!" said the tiger.

Again the fox whispered, "Quiet, grandfather. God left me here to hold up the end of the world. If I drop it the world will be destroyed. I'm very hungry, grandfather. Do you want to help me? You climb up and hold it and I'll come down. I'll go get a drink of water."

The tiger believed him and said, "All right, then." He climbed up to take hold of the end of the earth and the fox came down laughing. The fox ran away.

The tiger got tired waiting. It was getting dark, and he said, "I think he's a liar. I'm going to drop it, even if the world does come to an end." When he climbed down to the ground he stood up and looked around, and nothing was shaking. He thought, "Nothing happened." He went again to look for the fox.

The fox turned over in his mind what he would do this time. He went to the edge of a river. There was a tree leaning out over the river. He climbed up into the tree.

Then the tiger got there and looked into the water. The fox made a face showing his teeth. The water reflected the face and

the tiger seeing the shadow, said, "The fox is under the water." He stretched out his hand to see if he could catch him. Unsuccessful, he thought, "No matter. I'm thirsty. I'll drink the river dry and catch him." He drank and drank and drank and drank. Then he fell over on the ground very uncomfortable from all the water.

The fox watched all that happened and came down out of the tree laughing. "Are you full, grandfather?" he asked. He ran away.

The tiger vomited water and followed the fox again.

The fox turned over in his mind what he would do this time. He went to a nut tree and asked the squirrel to help him. "Crack open two nuts for me to eat, friend squirrel."

The squirrel heard and broke open the nuts. However, the fox didn't eat them but kept them to heckle the tiger again. Later, the tiger arrived. He spoke to the fox.

"What happened, grandfather?" asked the fox. "I don't know anything. I've been here a long time eating the nuts from this tree I planted." He gave the tiger one. Then he gave him another.

"They're very sweet, brother fox. I want more."

"Crack one then, grandfather," said the fox.

"All right, then. How shall I do it?" asked the tiger.

"Wait a minute, grandfather," said the fox. He hunted a stone and gave it to the tiger, saying, "Like this you hit it." The fox showed him where to put it between his feet, and the tiger did as told. "Nearer your belly," called out the fox. The tiger obeyed.

"Now say first 'Unq?irih k?toro?p', ordered the fox.

The tiger said the words. When he struck at the nut, he

hit himself a crushing blow. The tiger screamed in pain, and rolled on the ground again.

The fox fled, turning over in his mind again what he'd do. Then he found an old, abandoned house. There were a lot of wasps on the walls. At night the fox caught a lot and filled a pot with them. He wrapped them up in a leaf like a tamale. Then he waited for the tiger.

The tiger arrived and said, "What are you doing, brother fox? The day has come for me to eat you."

"Why, grandfather?" asked the fox. "I never did anything to you."

"You're always making a fool of me," replied the tiger.

"Why, no," said the fox. "I'm here keeping the house because my brother went to be married. That's why there are tamales on the fire. Do you want to stay here, grandfather, so that I can go meet the groom?"

"You're really not going to take advantage of me?" asked the tiger.

The fox replied, "When did I ever do anything like that to you?"

"All right, then," said the tiger, and the fox went out. Before he left, he told the tiger, "Grandfather, when you hear a noise in the pot, you take off the lid to see if the tamale is done, so you can eat it. Poor thing, you're sick!"

The tiger said, "All right, then." Later, he heard the noise in the pot and took off the lid. All the wasps flew out and bit him. He cried out for pain.

When the fox heard a racket in the house, he laughed and

ran away. He started a fire around the house, and the tiger inside was burned to death. The fox was happy. Putting out the fire, then, he got the tiger's head, as the tigress was still waiting for her husband. Every morning early the fox took the tiger's head to the house and sang, "Chikmeling, chichikmeling, grandfather's dead, grandmother's left."

The old tigress heard, and every day went out to see the head of her husband. She said, "This is the soul of my husband."

The fox thus heckled the old tigress. Every day she cried. Then she died, and the fox was happy and lived happily ever after.