



Naiguata and the Seagulls

Caraca Carib People – Venezuela

Legend has it that the cacique of the Caracas, one of the Carib tribes that inhabited the coastal regions, was a dreamer. Perhaps that trait of character came from the name his parents had given him, *Naiguatá*, which meant ‘peak’ or ‘vantage point’ in their language. For every sunset he would gaze out over the blue horizon of the Caribbean Sea from mountain slopes on the coast.

Stout and robustly built, Naiguatá was the image one would expect of a Carib warrior chief. However, he was gentle in character and not given to boasting and conflict, but silent and inclined to a contemplative life. In fact, from a very young age he had been trained as a *piache* or shaman, recognising the gifts of a man of power, capable of healing illnesses and of having visions of the future. And not only that: he was also said to be able to talk to animals, trees and plants.

Perhaps this explained the long periods Naiguatá spent watching and interacting with the seagulls. He would observe them dancing in the sea breezes like a lover, enraptured by the turns, dives and capers of their flight. It was even said that he was able to interpret their movements in the sky to foretell the future, depending on the dances the birds performed with the wind.

One day, a large group of strangers who had appeared on their shores only a few years before arrived; emigrants who seemed to be ashamed of their bodies, for they were always covered with cloth and metal. Their *cacique*, whom the outsiders called ‘captain,’ introduced himself to Naiguatá by saying his name was Juanrodriguezsuárez, which

Naiguatá thought was too long a name for a cacique. But, understanding that it was none of his business what the outsiders wanted to do with their bodies and their names, Naiguatá instructed his tribe to treat them kindly and hospitably.

They offered the newcomers cassava and maize, and also fish fresh taken from the waves, while the outsiders offered them in return some coloured beads and ‘mirrors,’ which delighted the children in the tribe – but also some of the young girls of marriageable age, who liked to stare at their faces for hours in those magic crystals.

But there was one day when the good relations with these foreigners went awry. Naiguatá had left early that day for the Guaraira-Repa-no, the mountain range that rose up behind the coast; and when he returned, he was told that the strangers had been there and that one of them had killed a seagull with one of those thick, thundering fire-canes. Then they showed him the carcass of the bird.

Naiguatá took the body of the seagull delicately in his hands, and a tear welled up in his eyes, as a visceral fire broke out within him – a fit of rage.

Without uttering a word, Naiguatá left with the bloodied seagull for the strangers’ camp. He knew where to find them. From the heights of the Guaraira-Repa-no you could see everything, so it did not take him long to find them.

As soon as he arrived, the cacique Juanrodriguezsuarez met him, and Naiguatá demanded that he hand over the stupid member of his tribe who had killed the seagull. The ‘captain’ stood up arrogantly and, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword, said to Naiguatá, raising his voice:

‘I’m not going to hand over any of my men to you for the death of a filthy seagull! I don’t know what all the fuss is about because of a stupid bird.’

He had not yet finished uttering those words when, alerted by the voices, no less than ten foreigners arrived with their fire-canes. In a threatening attitude, they stood beside their chief, glaring harshly at the Carib.

Naiguatá said nothing. He simply looked back at them one by one and, turning around, walked away with the bloodied seagull.

That same night, when the outsiders were sleeping, Naiguatá and his Caracas arrived in the utmost silence at the settlers' camp and, after putting the sentries to sleep, woke up all the intruders with a knife to their necks.

It did not take them long to seize the outsiders' weapons and to find the author of the arquebus shot that had killed the seagull. And after tying him up, Naiguatá looked the 'captain' in the eye with a fierce look, without uttering a word, in a silent warning not to try to follow him. And the 'captain' immediately understood the warning, being aware that Naiguatá could have killed the sentries and all his men in the camp without raising any commotion, but had not done so.

The next morning, the stranger who had killed the seagull was laid on a large rock on the seashore, still handcuffed and looking fearful. In front of him, Naiguatá was inwardly debating what to do with the man, what kind of punishment to inflict on him. It even crossed his mind to put him to death for his arrogance and stupidity in so wantonly and senselessly murdering such a fascinating and marvellous being. But Naiguatá realised that he could not let himself be carried away by the burning rage that had come over him at the sight of the dead seagull.

'What am I going to do with you?' he said reflectively to the stranger, with a stony look on his face.

And, at that very instant, a flock of seagulls, an enormous mass of wings, hovered over them in the sky. The seagulls shaded the frightened stranger, and Naiguatá watched his friends overhead.

His gaze softened and, a moment later, he closed his eyes in understanding. He lowered his head and, as the seagulls flew off in different directions, he opened his eyes again to look at the stranger.

'I am going to let you go,' he said, 'because the seagulls have forgiven you and do not want you to suffer any harm.'

And, hardening his gaze again to the point where the stranger was filled with dread, he added:

‘But, if you take another life unnecessarily, if it is not for hunger and survival, I will come and get you and make you eat your fire-cane.’

The Spaniards were very surprised to see the seagull killer return to their camp. They were convinced that the Caracas were going to slaughter him and, in fact, that is what they later recounted in their chronicles. They always tried to make the inhabitants of the area look like unscrupulous savages, exaggerating any incidents in order to appear more ‘civilised’ and ‘heroic’ than the invaded peoples. In the end, history is always written by those who impose their culture and their view of things.

As for Naiguatá, he would still have to bring out his warrior side a few years later, but he would go down in the history of his people, and even in the history of the invaders, as a prudent and conciliatory leader, wise and respected by all.

When he was old, he disappeared one day and no one ever found him. Some say that he became a seagull. □

Adapted by Grian A. Cutanda (2025).

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Comments

It is an honour for me (GC) to have written this adaptation of the history of Naiguatá. Firstly, because, although my parents were Spanish, I was born in the lands that once belonged to the Caracas. And secondly, because the name Naiguatá is associated with the most wonderful memories of a wondrous childhood. As a child, I used to go swimming with my family on the beautiful Caribbean beaches of the town of Naiguatá, north of Caracas. Perhaps this town owes its name to the fact that it was there that the legendary Carib cacique lived.

Having pointed all this out, I want to justify the fact that I have composed an adaptation of a story from the First Nations of the Americas, lest I be accused of falling foul of *cultural appropriation*. At The Earth Stories Collection we try to be very scrupulous in determining whether or

not we can adapt a traditional story, and we have a rule that we do not adapt the stories of those peoples who suffered from European colonisation in different parts of the globe.

In this case, however, and unfortunately, the Caraca Carib People of which Naiguatá was the leader no longer exist. In fact, of the Carib peoples, there remain only those tribes that managed to survive on a few Caribbean islands, namely Dominica and Guadeloupe, who are now called Kalinagos. Elsewhere, the Carib tribes merged with other native peoples in Venezuela, Brazil and the Guianas, with the Spaniards themselves who invaded the Caribbean region, and even with African slaves brought to America by the Europeans, giving rise to the Garifuna or 'Black Caribs' of St. Vincent Island.

As pointed out by Antczak *et al.* (2020), the historical continuity of some of the indigenous communities mentioned in the 16th century chronicles persisted well into the 20th century, 'when biological and cultural miscegenation virtually erased their sense of indigenous identity' (p. 519). All this in an aboriginal population terribly decimated – literally – by the diseases brought by the Spaniards, because the smallpox epidemics of 1580-1581 and 1587-1590 'in vast areas of northern South America together wiped out 90% of the indigenous population' (*ibid.*, p. 523).

It could be said, without the slightest exaggeration, that the Caribs were not defeated by the Spanish conquistadors, but by the diseases they inoculated them with.

So, there being no representative of the Caraca Carib People from whom to ask permission or from whom to request an adaptation to include this legend in our Collection, I undertook the adaptation of this tale of Naiguatá as a way of payment and retribution for the collective debt that, as a Spaniard by blood, I owe to the people who cared for the land where I was born. Let this story serve as a starting point for the inexcusable request for forgiveness that the representatives of the Spanish nation will one day have to make to all the peoples of the Americas to whom they did so much harm.

As for the character, his people and his history, we know that the territories of Naiguatá and his Caracas extended from the region of

present-day Caracas and its coastline to the city we know today as Puerto la Cruz, in eastern Venezuela. As Villalba (2009) points out:

The conquistadors had already been using the term Caracas to refer not only to a vast region that delimited a province – also called Venezuela – created by them, but also and especially to the fearsome Caracas Indians.

In the end, the Spanish invaders would end up calling “Caracas” to any ethnic or aboriginal people who confronted them with determination’ (ibid.).

As for the supposed encounter that, according to legend, took place between Naiguatá and captain Juan Rodríguez Suárez, this must have taken place, in any case, in the summer of 1561. It is known that the Spaniard military officer entered the territories of the Caracas at the end of June 1561 and that he died at the end of September of the same year at the hands of another aboriginal people in the northwestern region of central Venezuela, in what is now the State of Lara.

Sources

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Associated text of the Earth Charter

Principle 15c: Avoid or eliminate to the full extent possible the taking or destruction of non-targeted species.

Other passages that this story illustrates

Preamble: To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: To realize these aspirations, we must decide to live with a sense of universal responsibility, identifying ourselves with the whole Earth community as well as our local communities.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world.

Preamble – Universal Responsibility: The spirit of human solidarity and kinship with all life is strengthened when we live with reverence for the mystery of being, gratitude for the gift of life, and humility regarding the human place in nature.

Principle 16: Promote a culture of tolerance, nonviolence, and peace.

