

# **THE GIRL AND THE GOBLINS**

**"Translating" Culture**

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*with and introductory note  
by Marshall Morris*

## "Translating" Culture

It is not an easy task to make the experience of life of another people clear and comprehensible. Translators, acutely aware of this, may, I think justifiably, take some liberties with the literal text in the interests of making its significance available to the reader of the translation. This they do all the time in regard to the intention of a contemporary and accessible author, (whether intentionally or not) as they make sense of the original. To make sense *means* to catch the sense of the original in one's own language, "to make it one's own."

In doing so, they will in a sense "simplify" the original: after all, what is readily available to us in our own language *is* simpler than something obscure to us because it is expressed in a second language.

Respect for the original may lead the translator to take special pains to give it, in translation, the same force and clarity, the same power and meaning for the reader that it originally had. It may be necessary to "complicate" the text by giving it in context. As is the case in "The Girl and the Goblins: 'Translating' Culture," it is necessary to say not only what the original text says but to suggest what the ordinary reader from the society in which the text originated might know or be able to piece together for himself; that, is, to say not only what is said but also what is merely suggested. Jorge Enjuto's point is well taken: "literal language means what it says, literary language may also mean what it does not say."<sup>1</sup> There are, in both literary and ethnographic translation, realms of meaning beyond the literal form of the original, so that in the latter case the "translation" must not only be of texts but also of the complexes of ideas which order the experience of life of a people.

A translation may not have the same purposes as the original did; perhaps it rarely does. The stories told here were intended by their tellers to frighten small girls into right behavior. The intention of the translator is to make the other experience live for us --which is, if you will, the point of literature and more broadly of writing. The form, then, also differs from that of the original. As it happens, the author is no mean story teller and that has made her excellent ethnography better still.

<sup>1</sup> Jorge Enjuto, "On Translation," *Three Lectures on Translation* (Río Piedras, Puerto Rico: Professional School of Translators, College of Humanities, University of Puerto Rico, 1971), p. 25.

There is a tradition for what I am calling here the "translation of culture," after T.O. Beidelman's edited volume of that name dedicated to E.E. Evans-Pritchard.<sup>2</sup> The epigraph, taken from Evans-Pritchard's *Theories of Primitive Religion*,<sup>3</sup> reads as follows:

I am not denying that the semantic difficulties in translation are great. They are considerable enough between, shall we say, French and English; but when some primitive language has to be rendered into our own tongue they are, and for obvious reasons, much more formidable. They are in fact the major problem are confronted with in the subject we are discussing...

He was discussing religious thought, and thought about religious thought; Beidelman was concerned with ethnographic translation, and Ríos-Guardia is a story teller who happens also to be a translator, making sense of a childhood experience. You will recognize in all of these the very ancient pursuit of understanding, one in which translation, in both its broad and strict senses, has a critical part.

<sup>2</sup> T.O. Beidelman, ed., *The Translation of Culture, Essays to E.E. Evans-Pritchard* (London: Tavistock, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1965).

The story "The Girl and the Goblins" belongs to the oral tradition of rural Panamanian children's literature. The purpose of this type of story is to instill in children obedience and fear of their parents. The theme of all the stories is the struggle between good and evil. In the end, good triumphs over evil thanks to the intervention of a figure of authority (usually the village priest). Nevertheless, victory is fleeting. The Devil, Tulivieja, the witches and the rest of the sinister characters continue to lie in wait for their victims in tree tops, mountains, and river-banks. So, a figure of authority is always needed.

This is the case of the story in question: the girl's father manages to save her only after the village priest intervenes. In addition to the original version, as I have decided to call the first version I heard, the story has a great number of variations. This is due to the absence of a written form. As a matter of fact, the title was invented, for this reason. The goblins can live in a cave as well as a garden; they can transform the girl into a queen as well as a slave; her father, as well as the priest, can rescue her. It's up to the story teller. Except for the addition of the Devil in one version, the characters are the same. The message of terror and obedience remains unchanged.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The author's introductory note, which is translated here by Barbara Cohen, was written originally in Spanish. So were the stories themselves, and the present versions are based closely on these. The translator of the article, Gail Tosto Geiger, wishes to thank Aileene Alvarez and Eliud Negrón for reading and commenting on the Spanish translation. --Ed.

Daniela Lara came to work for my parents when Mari, my sister, was four years old, and I was three. For the past four years she had worked in Penonomé<sup>2</sup>, my mother's hometown. Her previous employer, a cousin of my mother's, sent Daniela to our house in Panamá City. She came from a small village called Pajonal, located several kilometers away from Penonomé, up in the mountains. The family farm was too small to support her parents and her six other brothers and sisters. When she was fourteen years old, her father decided she could earn more money for the family working as a maid. The money she sent home barely allowed the family to survive.

She was a stocky woman with small brown eyes, which were in marked contrast with her wide round face. Even when angry or embarrassed, she always smiled. On the day she arrived, she smiled shyly as my mother spoke to her of her duties. As to us, my mother asked her to tell her if we did not do as she told us. The first few months she did this. Gradually, she began to discipline us herself. She could be just as strict as my parents and even repeated their perennial "I-told-you-so." Although I vaguely remember her spanking me once or twice, it happened more than that. (When it comes to my parents, I can remember the hour, the place, the number of times they spanked me.) Even though my mother never relinquished her parental role, she trusted Daniela's judgement in dealing with us. We soon learned that if we told mother Daniela had punished us she would side with Daniela. "You must have deserved it," was her usual comment. Likewise, we couldn't turn to Daniela for comfort whenever our mother punished or spanked us. Their mutual moral support strengthened their relationship. Before dinner they'd discuss how we behaved, share a joke, make plans for the following day. If they didn't want us to overhear their conversation, they'd talk in a kind of word game only they understood. Sometimes they'd do so just to tease us.

Owing to the affection Daniel showed for us, and to her cheerful willingness to do her housework, mother began to take an interest in Daniela's life. She encouraged her to visit the doctor and the dentist regularly, and to take care of her appearance. Daniela responded to the attention mother paid to her by obeying her orders to a tee, and by adopting her facial expressions, tone of voice, favorite expressions and mannerisms.

<sup>2</sup> Capital city of the Province of Coclé, Republic of Panamá.

Even though she was allowed to punish us, and did, we thought of her as our friend and accomplice. Her openness in sharing her personal life with us and the fact that we spent together a great part of the day, made her the center of our world. Not surprisingly, we wouldn't go anywhere without her and whenever our parents asked us to do something, we would ask her if it was all right.

While she did her domestic chores, she would tell us about her school years, her friends, her family, and all the folk remedies and *historias de miedo* (horror stories) she had learned in Pajonal. Her most vivid memories about school were her teachers. The first- and second-grade teachers hit her with a ruler at the slightest mistake. Her third-grade teacher was good because all she did was read comic books during classtime and, in the afternoon, took long naps. Daniela dropped out of school after the third grade.

Most of her friends from school also worked as maids. On a visit to Pajonal, she found out that one of them, Rosalía, had gotten pregnant and had had to return home. Rosalía's father became so enraged that he beat her senseless. After she gave birth, nobody in the village wanted to be the child's godparent. For the baptism rite, Rosalía took the role of the godparent. When Daniela first heard what had happened to her friend, she was shaken, but, she said: "Your father has the authority to beat his children, no matter how old they are." (Two summers later, Daniela's father beat her severely because she was not sending home more money. At that time she was twenty-three years old.)

We rarely heard her talk about her family, except when she returned from her vacations or when she got word that they needed more money. She preferred to talk about the beliefs and folk remedies from her village. She taught us to pour salt over our cuts and scratches to stop the bleeding. The sting from the salt was unbearable. Yet we did it every time we cut ourselves because we saw her do so. The black and purple bruises on our bodies, usually the result of a fight with our friends or between ourselves, meant that a witch had bitten us the night before. Once she returned from her vacation with her arms and legs covered with bruises. When we asked her about it, she blamed it on the witches. As if to prove it, she poked inside of the bruises in her legs with a needle and said: "There's the tooth!" I distinctly saw it.

Night time was the best time for the *historias de miedo*. Most of them revolved around characters like *la Tulivieja*. Legend has it that she was a beautiful woman who drowned her illegitimate child. The

gods turned her into an old, hairy creature and sentenced her to roam the riverbanks in search for her child forever. Daniela also talked to us about the witches, *the Malo* (the Devil), people with *mal de ojo*, the evil eye (the ability to kill children or bring misfortune on others by looking at them), and people who had a personal relationship with *el Malo*. Any man, woman or child could fall prey to these characters. Luckily, *el Bendito* (the priest) is always nearby to come to the rescue, with his Cross and Holy Water. Yet the victory is temporary, *la Tulivieja* and her kind return the following night. Sometimes my sister and I were so scared we'd sleep huddled together.

Daniela had often asked my mother to take us to her farm for a day. Pajonal by then had become a fantastic place, like the woods in "Snow White" or "Sleeping Beauty." We looked forward to that visit with a mixture of excitement and fear. When we arrived, the whole family came out to greet us. They let Daniela do all the talking though. She was anxious for my mother to try her mother's *sancocho*. After lunch, we would go for a walk. She showed us the orange grove and the coffee plants behind her house. I kept looking for *la Tulivieja*, but I never saw her. And that was all: a two-room adobe structure, a chicken coop, an orange grove and few rows of coffee plants.

As we were leaving for Penonomé, she warned us: "Behave on Good Friday!" The next week was Holy Week, and around that time she liked to tell us a story about two little boys from her village. It was customary for parents not to spank their children on that day. These two little boys waited the whole year for Good Friday. Then they did whatever they pleased: they neglected their chores, chased the chickens, tore down the clothes lines... But their mother could not touch them because, as they reminded her often, "It's Good Friday!" The final stroke came when they went swimming at three o'clock. Horrified and angry at their irreverence, the mother said to herself: "Wait 'til tomorrow." The following day, she woke up very early and picked up a *rejo* (whip). "Aha, Good Friday's over!" she said very time she hit them. How Daniela did laugh when she got to the last part! This was her favorite story. she would tell it to us whether we wanted to hear it or not.

According to a popular belief, people who swim on that day, and especially at three o'clock, turn into fish. Hence the horror the mother in the story experiences. To keep us from swimming, our grandmother kept a watchful eye on us. If she heard us complaining, she would inform us that an ambulance had just gone by carrying a girl, fish from her waist down, to the hospital. She repeated her "news bulletin" Good Friday after Good Friday. The point of both

stories was keep us out of the water, and they did.

Daniela also had a story to keep us from swimming too far away from her. We used to go to a river behind my grandmother's house. One day, as we rested on the bank of the river, she pointed to the other side: "You see those bushes over there? Behind them, there's a cave where the goblins live." That was the first time she told us the story about a girl who is kidnapped by the goblins. Mari and I heard the same story, yet we remember it differently.

My version goes as follows:

- A. 1. Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to the riverside every morning to wash her family's clothing. Afterwards, she liked to go for a swim. One day, while swimming, a goblin grabbed her by the legs and took her away.
2. Several hours later, her father, worried by her delay, went to look for her. She was not anywhere to be seen. Looking towards the other side of the river, he caught a glimpse of a cave. At once he imagined that that was where the goblins had taken her. Slowly he swam to the cave. There, in the back, he saw the goblins felt his presence and fled with the girl. He ran behind them until he could just reach her, but she slipped from his hands. For several days, he tried to rescue his daughter, but every time she slipped from his hands.
3. Finally, he decided to seek the advice of *el Bendito*. The next day he went into the town. Without saying a word, *el Bendito* listened to the man, took a *rejo* out of a drawer, blessed it with Holy Water and handed it to him. He returned to the cave immediately. He went in more quietly than ever; still the goblins felt his presence and ran away more quickly than ever. The father could barely keep up with them. As he was about to lose them from sight, he managed to strike the girl with the tip of the whip. She stopped running. Slowly the slime fell off the girl's body. And so father and daughter went home.

My sister's version is this:

- B. 1. Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to the riverside every morning to wash her family's clothing. Afterwards, she liked to go for a swim. One day, while swimming, a goblin grabbed her by the legs and took her away.



2. Several hours later, her father, worried by her delay, went to look for her. She was not anywhere to be seen. Looking towards the other side of the river, he caught a glimpse of a cave. At one he imagined that that was where the goblins had taken her. Slowly he swam to the cave. There, in the back, he saw the goblins in a circle around his daughter who was covered with a greenish slime. Hard as he tried to enter quietly, the goblins felt his presence and fled with the girl. He ran behind them until he could just reach her, but she slipped from his hands.

3. Immediately, he decided to seek the advice of *el Bendito*. And so, *el Bendito* and the father headed towards the cave. The townspeople, alarmed by the news, joined them along the way. When they arrived there, they could see the goblins at the entrance of the cave and the girl behind them. *El Bendito* evoked *el Malo* who did not take long to appear. "The only way you can rescue the girl, is if you let me whip *el Bendito*," were his terms. *El Bendito* agreed. The father and the townspeople tied him to a tree branch. With every stroke, the goblins began to disappear and the slime to fall off the girl's body. When all the goblins were gone, the father was able to rescue his daughter. Everybody went back into the town to offer a mass in thanksgiving.

Both versions share certain aspects. The principal characters are the same: the girl, the goblins, the girl's father and *el Bendito*. The girl is the central figure of the story, yet she has a passive role: she is kidnapped and she is rescued. A greenish slime covers her body. References to water (the river, the slime) and the *rejo* are also present. In fact, their presence leave the theme of the story unchanged: the girl becomes a woman.

For the girl, crossing the river becomes the first part of a two-part *rite de passage* from girlhood into womanhood. Her stay in the cave is the gestation before she is born to her new status in society. The slime, then, is a placenta-like substance; the cave, the womb. Striking the girl is the conclusion of the rite. It becomes comparable to slapping a baby after it's born. Therefore, without her father and *el Bendito* she would not have survived. With the priest's blessing, the *rejo* acquired its life-saving quality. Thus, it represents the authority of *el Bendito* which arises from his power to protect others from harm.

The elements of the story lend themselves to a second interpretation. The kidnapping signals the menarche. This process comes as unexpectedly as the kidnapping. The slime is the menstrual flow and the days she remains in the cave are the duration of the menses. As in the above interpretation, the girl's only hope out of a terrifying experience lies with her father. The reference to violence, in this interpretation, emphasizes the higher social status of the male characters. In short, both interpretations lead to the same conclusion: in exchange for the protection she receives from the male figures, she owes them obedience.

I feel uneasy about this interpretation, first, owing to the absence of other female characters. Second, because of my ignorance about how Daniela felt about the menarche. She never mentioned the subject to us. Her silence indicates that the event was treated as a private matter between the girl and her mother. Yet, in the second interpretation, the fact that *el Bendito* intervenes takes the event out of the family context into the more general context of her society.

In my sister's version, the action takes place on the same day. After the father realizes the goblins took his daughter, he knows what to do. He seeks the help of *el Bendito*. Mari introduces two other characters: the townspeople and *el Malo*. And here, *el Bendito* participates directly in the rescue. Afterwards, they return to the town to offer a mass in tanksgiving. All the new elements intensify the imagery of my version: the townspeople serve as the conscience of the community and as witnesses to what happened to the girl. The presence of *el Malo* strengthens the connection between the goblins and evil. The people rely on *el Bendito* for protection, and the goblins depend on *el Malo*.

In my sister's version the girl reaches womanhood through her first sexual experience. The green slime means that she is polluted. To restore her to society takes the intercession of a representative of Good. Only through an act of violence is she able to leave the cave. (The reference to the *rejo* is implicit.) In the end the forces of evil must give way to the forces of righteousness, but at a price.

Disobedience to one's parents, or the possibility of it, is central to the use of violence in the story about the two little boys and the story about the girl. The *rejo* reminds them of their lower status, whereas the boys will grow into a new status in life, as is the case of Rosalía, womanhood does not bring change of a noticeable kind to their lives. A few months after giving birth, Rosalía went back to work as a maid.

From the first time I heard the story, I was curious about the girl. I wanted to know more about her, but Daniela did not know what else to say. I nagged her so much that she would tell me the story with variations. Each of the three types of variations begins as follows:

- C. 1. Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to the riverside every morning to wash her family's clothing. Afterwards, she liked to go for a swim. One day, while swimming, a goblin grabbed her by the legs and took her away.

The first variation continues:

2a. Several hours later, her father, worried by her delay, went to look for her. She was not anywhere to be seen. He walked upstream along the bank of the river. After a long walk, he caught a glimpse of a beautiful garden with all sorts of flowers and butterflies. He could see the goblins in a circle around his daughter who was covered with a greenish slime...

Alternatively, the second paragraph could read as follows:

2b. Several hours later, her father, worried by her delay, went to look for her. She was not anywhere to be seen. Looking towards the other side of the river, he caught a glimpse of a cave. At once he imagined that that was where the goblins had taken her. Slowly he swam to the cave. There, in the back, he saw the goblins watching the girl as she washed their clothing. She covered with a greenish slime...

The ending of these variations could be the one in my version or the one in my sister's.

The second type, which begins as does my original version, reads as follows:

- D. 1. Once upon a time there was a little girl who went to the riverside every morning to wash her family's clothing. Afterwards, she liked to go for a swim. One day, while swimming, a goblin grabbed her by the legs and took her away.

Several hours later, her father worried by her delay, went to look for her. She was not anywhere to be seen

Looking towards the other side of the river, he caught a glimpse of a cave. At once he imagined that that was where the goblins had taken her. Slowly he swam to the cave. There, in the back, he saw the globins in a circle around his daughter who was covered with a greenish slime. Hard as he tried to enter quietly, the globins felt his presence and fled with the girl. He ran behind them until he could just reach her, but she slipped from his hands. For several days, he tried to rescue his daughter, but every time she slipped from his hands.

2. One day he found the cave empty, and on the next day, and on the next day. The goblins had taken his daughter forever.

The third variation has a different ending from the others:

3. Finally, he decided to seek the advice *el Bendito*. The next day he went into the town. *El Bendito* told the father to go to the cave the following day. That night, *el Bendito* entered the Rectory and evoked *el Malo*, who did not take long to appear. "The only way you can rescue the girl is if you let me whip you," were his terms. *El Bendito* agreed. *El Malo* tied his hands to a beam. With every stroke, the slime began to fall off the girl's body. The following morning the father met the girl at the entrance of the cave. And so father and daughter went home.

The first type refers to the location and status of the girl while in captivity. The goblins could have taken her to a beautiful garden or to a cave. They could have made her their queen or their slave. These changes, again, do not vary the basic story. The second type differs from all the others. The father tries to rescue his daughter by himself. There is no mention of *el Bendito*. The separation from her society is permanent. If we take this separation to mean marriage, it is a sign that she is now under the power of another male figure. It can also be said that the father lost his daughter because he did not seek the help of someone higher in authority than he. The third type combines my sister's version and mine. *El Bendito* makes a pact with *el Malo* at night and at the church's Rectory. The following morning, the father literally picks up his daughter at the entrance of the cave.

Since this is an oral story, no one version or variation thereof can be considered definitive. Whether the girl lives in a cave or in a garden, whether *el Bendito* goes to the cave or evokes *el Malo* at the Rectory, depends on the storyteller. Daniela probably told me the variations where the girl is not rescued as an example to girls who misbehave.

When thinking about this story, I remember that Daniela used to say that the girl was just a little girl, like me. In fact, it was Daniela who resembled the girl. She worked for her family and, despite her age, my mother treated her as a child. She had to do as others, her father or my parents, told her to do.

She underwent her *rite de passage* at the age of twenty-six. One night, when my parents, my sister and I returned from a party, she wasn't home. A few moments later, our neighbor's maid came in to tell us that Daniela had asked her to accompany her to the hospital. She had complained of cramps earlier in the evening. At the hospital they sent her to the maternity ward. It wasn't until she came back with her baby boy that Mari and I believed it. We had kidded her lately about her getting fat. She would only say: "That's what happens when you eat too much rice." She stayed with us for two days. Then she went home.