

Suri (Happy in Nheengatu) and Pimenta, the Sloth

By Bete Morais

(translation by Coletivo de Tradutores Berkeley-Brasil)*



Suri (Happy in Nheengatu)

It was a summer afternoon. The water was cold after the rain. I was walking barefoot over the stones, looking for a new story, a new discovery.

After I spent a few minutes observing the river, a large fish jumped out beautifully. I think it was a giant *pacu*.¹ I walked a little bit more and saw a small island full of rocks with many swallows sitting down. While some were sitting down, just

1. A freshwater fish related to the piranha.

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feeling the river breeze, others were entering and exiting the hole of a rock.

The swallows had a magical song. They were taking me to other worlds. Everything seemed to be perfect and balanced while they were nearby. They were always whispering the same thing in my ears, "in order to fly, it is necessary to dream."

I was on the island of the "agouti peoples," and from there, I would stay looking at the swallows, who were sliding over the River and

then returning to the large rock. I was really determined to get closer to the swallows. I was eager to meet their nest.

I sighed and started looking for a small canoe to cross over to the small island. I found a very small canoe; it only fit one person, but the paddle was missing. I spent twenty minutes looking for one but only found a small stick.

I entered the canoe and stayed there, sliding the small stick on the water and talking to the River, as I would do every day. After a few minutes, Pequeno,² my grandmother's dog, came running and got into the canoe as if he were asking, "Hey, where are you going?"

I touched one of his paws, caressed his head, and said, "I am trying to go to that island to see the swallows, but I did not find an oar."

After I said that, the canoe started shaking, and we almost fell in the water because of the shock.

Pequeno and I started running, and the canoe continued shaking. But there were no waves. I even thought it was a playful river dolphin because once, a playful dolphin followed us when we returned from the small beach. Playful dolphins always show up around here, but my grandmother says they are magical and can take us to other worlds.

The truth is that Pequeno and I would certainly go to the playful dolphin world because our curiosity is bigger than our fear, but that canoe moving alone was strange.

Pequeno and I continued watching from afar. Then I had an idea. I got closer to the canoe and asked, "Can you take Pequeno and me to that island?"

The answer came immediately. After I asked the question, the canoe shook.

I looked at Pequeno and said, "It looks like the canoe wants to take us to that island, but you can stay."

Pequeno cried a bit but entered the canoe. And then he covered his face with his paws.

I looked at Pequeno and said, "Hold on because I am going to push the canoe. And don't be afraid, we know how to swim. If anything, we can swim to a rock and ask for help."

Then he got calmer and waved his tail.

I pushed and got into the canoe. We went sliding towards the house of the swallows, but when we arrived in the canal, the canoe started to go down. Pequeno and I widened our eyes.

The canoe sank a little bit more, and we closed our eyes. But then we started to hear the sound of the waves, so we opened our eyes again. Then, we noticed that the River waves were taking us to the house of the swallows. And finally, we breathed!

We leaned on the rock slowly. Pequeno got out running, and I pulled the canoe towards the rock. I called Pequeno, looked at him, and said, "I think the River likes us!"

Then he jumped and started barking, and I said, "You can't bark, Pequeno; the swallows are going to fly away."

Well, in fact, when we arrived at the large rock, there were no swallows. We both became sad. The sun was almost disappearing. We sat next to each other and admired the sunset.

When a cool wind hit us, I sighed and closed my eyes. After a few minutes, with my eyes still closed, I began to hear the swallows, so I started to smile. It was as if the sound of the swallows were coming from within me. Yes, they were part of my body. They were my healing, the echo of my small soul.

After we spent a few minutes feeling the sunset, we walked slowly towards the small canoe to go back home.

The way back was more peaceful because the island of the swallows was located on top of the "island of the agoutis." So, it was only necessary to push the canoe and let it be taken by the current until the backwater. But on the way back, something surprising happened.

When we reached the middle of the way, our little one stopped moving. Then, we saw two groups of thousands of swallows crossing our path. Pequeno became very happy. He began to bark and jump on the fore of the canoe.

The two groups of swallows started making a choreography in the direction of the sunset. They would pass by very closely around us, creating wind. They were flying synchronized around us and also above our heads. It was a party of magic and joy.

After the ritual of the swallows, our small canoe started to go down again, and immediately the group of hundreds of swallows was swallowed by the energy of the Rio Negro. Pequeno and I came back happy and full of swallows inside our bodies.

2. Pequeno's name translates as "Little."

Pimenta, the sloth

It was a winter morning in the Alto Rio Negro. It was very cold, and my brothers and I were sitting around the fire, and our father Wiráwaçu (father big bird) was roasting many fish. Breakfast was warm *bejú*,³ plantain porridge, and roasted Mandi.⁴

While everybody was happy and telling jokes, my younger brother was sitting down at the corner of the fire hut on his small bench with drawings of the *jabuti* tortoise. He was sulky because my father did not want to catch a small otter to be his diving friend.

We were three children: I, the oldest, João, Antônio, the second son, and the youngest, Miguel. All names had been chosen by the parents, but my father would call the youngest Muihpü (Sun) or Curumim (boy).

On that day, when my father saw the youngest in a sulky mood, he said, "Curumim, come here! I will tell the story of Pimenta, the sloth, but no more sour face."

The Curumim gave a skeptical look and slowly approached the fire. The youngest loved story time; it was a joyful moment at home. My father loved making storytelling circles before going to sleep. He had many stories about his long journeys in the forest.

I remember that on that day, he did not go out for a walk in the forest because it had been raining a lot. So we stayed home, just talking and eating porridge while my mother Maria was preparing the dough to make *bejú*.

Before starting the story, my father served the roasted mandi, brought over *bejú* and porridge, and then said, "Eat up!"

Then he started the story saying:

At the time of my father, only two families lived around here. I remember when I was eight years old and wanted to have a pet. I spent two days crying, and my father stayed in silence.

Well, he did not say anything because I already knew the rules—no pets at all. He said it was a great responsibility and that I needed to mature a bit more.

After two days of crying, I decided to walk at the river's edge. Right there near the house, there was a shrubby area with many *embaúba*⁵ trees of all sizes. I was looking for insects, and I was thinking about adopting some.

After a few minutes, I stopped and sat on a small mound of sand. While I was there, trying to find the ideal pet, I started to hear the sound of tree branches breaking. As I heard the noise, I stood up quickly and looked towards the *embaúba* trees, but I could not see anything.

I stood still for some time, watching. Then, I was able to see a few small branches falling, and it was not an *embaúba* tree. When I got closer to the tree, I saw a tiny sloth trying to cross to the *embaúba* tree to eat.

The moment I looked into the sloth's gentle eyes, I was mesmerized and immediately started talking to her. It was as if she knew me. She was not afraid. She looked at me and continued crossing. I spent the whole morning telling the little sloth my whole life's story.

After I finished telling everything about my life, the little sloth came down slowly in my direction. She could understand me.

When I saw her getting closer, I was very happy. I thought she could be a great pet because she was quiet and would not give me too much work because we understood each other.

I looked at the small sloth, and I said, "Let's go, you can stay at home!"

After I said that, I got close, grabbed the little sloth, and slowly walked away. I managed to enter the house without being seen by anyone, and I left the little sloth in my hammock, where she stayed very quietly.

Before I left again, I told the sloth, "I'm going to get more food. Stay here quietly because no one can see you." Then I ran to get more food.

I knew the elders and my brothers would come back much later, so I calmly managed to get some *embaúba* leaves for the little sloth to eat.

When I came back home, the sloth was in the same place, sleeping very quietly. At that moment, I thought, "She is perfect. She does not make any noise; she stays quiet, and my father will never notice."

In the afternoon, when everyone arrived, I chatted normally. I ate a little bit and I went immediately to sleep. Everyone in the house was concerned about my behavior, but they did not say anything.

It was at night when everything happened. The little sloth revealed herself.

3. A type of flatbread made of cassava flour.

4. A type of catfish found in the River Negro.

5. Cecropia trees.

After everyone was sleeping, I was still awake because I was anxious. Every moment, I would take a peek at the little sloth. But there was a time when I fell asleep, and I woke up with a strong pull on my hammock. The little sloth had started swinging on my hammock, she started making noise, and at that moment, my father woke up and said, "Are you hot, Curumim? It is not cold. Stop that."

When I heard that, I quickly picked up the little sloth and put her inside the hammock. Up until that moment, I did not know that sloths would become agitated at night. She would walk and jump very fast.

In the middle of the night, I could not resist and fell asleep. The little sloth went straight into the fire hut and made a mess. She was hanging on everything and made a lot of noise. The dogs began to bark, and the sloth, afraid, hung on to my mother's baskets that were hanging on top of the fire.

My father woke up scared. We all woke up and ran there to see.

I jumped out of the hammock and ran to the fire hut. When I arrived there, my father was trying to calm the dogs down.

When I arrived, my father looked at me and said, "This sloth is a firecracker! She destroyed everything. I don't know how she got here. She could have fallen into the fire."

I was scared, and I did not have the courage to tell my father that I had adopted the little sloth.

After my father managed to catch the sloth, I said, "I know where we can leave Pimenta."⁶

My father looked at me with a serious face and asked, "Where?"

So I answered, "Nearby, in the shrubby area. There are many *embaúba* trees there. Maybe her mother is there."

My father looked at me and said, "I find this strange. Don't you want to adopt her?"

I replied, "I prefer to go there and visit Pimenta."

My father smiled and said, "Let's all go and leave Pimenta in her house."

After the dogs calmed down, we all went to leave Pimenta on the *embaúba* trees.

The sloth stayed there for a long time. I would always visit her and stay there, talking to her for hours. After she grew up, she must have moved to the other side of the River, but I have never forgotten her because she could see me. She was like a person.

After listening to my father's whole story, the youngest smiled, hugged him, and we finished eating.

Bete Morais is an Indigenous person from the Desana people. She was born in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, in Amazonas. She is an actress, writer, poet, and art educator with a law degree. She has worked in theater since 2011 in the field of embodied performance, a social theater that portrays human relationships and the environment. She studied theater at the Centro de Artes of the Federal University of Amazonas and law at the State University of Mato Grosso do Sul. She currently leads a body and voice workshop in the education field.

The content, themes, cosmovision, and style of her fictional narratives are expressions of her ancestral culture, Tukano and Desana, and the civilizatory environment of the Alto Rio Negro, Amazonas, Brazil. For her, art is a way of talking to the world; it is self-knowledge and sharing that which one is feeling.

6. Pimenta's name translates as hot pepper. It is also a word used to describe naughty children.

