

Christ's Witchdoctor

PART 1

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A first-hand account of the dramatic conversion of a notorious Amazon witchdoctor, who became a jungle missionary for Christ.

This is an abridged version of the book first published in 1963.



Chapter 1 Must a baby die?

This is the story of Elka, who was only 7 years old at the beginning of this true story. He was a member of the Wai Wai, a South American Indian tribe who lived in the jungle of British Guiana.

Elka skillfully maneuvered his boat along the river on his morning rounds, checking the fish traps for the village breakfast. This particular morning, he begrudged doing this chore as his mother was going to give birth, perhaps to a baby brother, and he longed to get home. In the swampy backwaters of the river, he had many traps to check. He might have to look at every one before finding a big fish that would provide breakfast for the whole village. If he didn't, the old men would be angry with him because they would have to make do with just cassava.

Elka cared nothing about breakfast this morning. His pace seemed slow. Would he ever reach the last trap? His mind constantly turned to his mother, probably giving birth at this moment. Why was it so important for Elka to be there when the baby was born? His cruel step-father, Tumika, was head of the village and decided whether new born babies would live or die. If the village population was growing too large, Tumika would decide to kill the newborn. The tradition was, that as soon as the baby was born, Tumika could lift up the baby, or ask a village member to lift up the baby. That was a sign that the baby would live. But if Tumika did not ask for the baby to be lifted up, and it was left lying on the ground in the birthing hut, then that was a sign that the baby would die at the hands of Tumika.

Elka dearly wanted a baby brother. He did not have a brother. Last time his mother gave birth to a boy, Tumika killed the baby with his club. Elka was angry. Although a 7-year-old boy could really do little to stop the actions of Tumika, Elka was determined that he would stop Tumika if only he could get there in time.

At last, as he paddled on the next trap, a big fish, half the boy's weight, was there in the trap. As fast as he could, he placed the fish in his boat and paddled for home.

As Elka neared the big house, his eyes were fixed on the birthing hut. In the Wai Wai culture, anything to do with birth and death was considered a bad omen. Dark spiritual powers could be at work in such events, so birthing huts were constructed temporarily for the occasion of the birth, and then removed.

Elka heard the cry of a baby. Yes, he had made it in time. But could he stop Tumika from killing the baby? Could he be the baby's protector? As he entered the birthing hut, he heard Tumika mumbling that the baby must die. In the brief stillness Elka looked down at his brother. He looked up at his mother, her whole body shaking with sobs.

"Mother, I want my brother! I don't want him to die!"

Tumika stood still, frozen by Elka's boldness.

"So you don't want him to die!" he mimicked. "But I'm going to kill him!" he shouted, his voice rising to a scream.

But suddenly a stream of village people came running into the hut. An old granny, whose job it was to support the mother during the

birth, rose up and shrieked, "Don't kill this child!" Then all the village people who had crowded into the hut began shouting as well. "Don't kill this child! Lift the child up!" they commanded.

Tumika looked into a dozen pairs of eyes set with fire, and into a dozen faces determined that he should not kill. In defeat, Tumika lowered his head. He struck out at Elka and knocked him to the ground. But then he picked up the baby, lifted him up and passed him to the granny. Tumika shouted at Elka, "If I had been there the day you were born, I would have killed you!" he said.

The umbilical cord was cut with a sharp-toothed pig jaw, and a slender piece of vine tied around it. The granny washed the baby and handed him back to the mother. The mother clasped the baby to her breast. To Elka she said, "We'll call him Yakuta, after our dead uncle. You have your little brother now Elka. He will be a fine boy – if the evil spirits don't spoil him"

Elka, suddenly a child again, started to cry with relief and happiness.

Chapter 2 Someday a witchdoctor

Eight big-rain seasons had come and gone since Elka saved his brother's life. Elka was now fifteen. Yakuta had lived, but Elka's mother had died a year later, giving birth to yet another baby, and Tumika fell ill and died not long after that. Elka was now an orphan. Soon after the death of Tumika, a half-brother, Chekema, came and took him away from Big Rocks, to another larger village called Big

Falls. It was a day's paddling up the Mapuera River. Elka was sad to be taken from the places and people he knew, especially Yakuta.

At Big Falls the time came for Elka to undergo an ordeal which, if passed, would make him strong and handsome as he grew into a man. Belts of stinging ants were to be tied to his legs. He knew the stings would hurt, but he dared not fail the test. Elka was given the first belt, which had holes punched along it. Once an ants' nest was found, he had to pick up the ants by their heads and poke the fat tail parts into the holes so they could not escape. The ants were about as long as a thumbnail and had stingers coming out of their tails.

Elka was beginning to be afraid. He had been stung before by the ants, but never by so many as this. What if he should cry in front of all those people? Some would laugh at him. Others would say, "He's just a boy – what can you expect?" What if he tore the belts off, unable to bear the stings? If he did, how in the world could he go through life? Chekema strapped the first belt around one leg, and then the second one. "Try to keep them on as long as you can," he said, not unkindly.

A prick struck the back of one leg. Instinctively Elka reached down to brush at it, then restrained himself. Soon came another prick, then another. The ants, unable to free their tails from the tightened bands, were stinging furiously in retaliation. The stings were like arrow points scratching his skin, or like the fangs of a hundred tiny snakes. His legs began to twitch. He clenched his fists. He dug his nails into his palms, determined not to touch his legs!

At first, he felt each sting. Soon both legs were burning. It felt like all one sting! Elka wanted to tear off the bands. He wanted to run to the river to cool his burning flesh. He wouldn't though. The people would laugh all the more and despise him for being a coward. He would stand fast – for a while yet. He stood stiffly, holding back the tears. The hurting was spreading from his legs, going up and down his whole body. He did not want to cry, but he did. The tears were spilling from his eyes and there was no holding them back. He could no longer stand still. He began to dance. The villagers roared laughing.

"Take them off!" he screamed at last.

Chekema did. Elka wondered if he had been strong enough to bring the reward of being accepted as a man. He had cried and was ashamed of himself.

"Elka," said Chekema, "You can boast of many stings. They will make you a strong and desirable man."

This ordeal marked the end of Elka's boyhood. A few days later he became a man through a simple ceremony. Chekema wrapped strings of tiny white beads around Elka's arms. With his armbands he bore the badge of youth, who could take one of the girls with growing breasts to be his wife. He could freely enter into the drunken frenzies of the tribal dances.

Growing up in his former village, Big Rocks, had been a simple life. He was educated by his uncle who taught him the jungle calls of the big-billed toucan and the bush turkey. On the river he learned to trap big fish, shoot piranhas with a bow and arrow and to kill

caiman alligators. In the forest, he learned to study animal droppings to track all kinds of birds and monkeys, and to pick up the scent of wild bush hogs. At Big Rocks he often took his younger brother Yakuta with him into the forest. Now at Big Falls, Elka found a friend in Mawasha, the son of Chekema. This boy was quiet and reflective. Though younger than Elka, he was taller. Together they explored new fishing spots and hunting trails.

As a man, Elka now pulled up his stool to sit with the men. Like the other men, he decorated himself with feathers and body paint. At field cutting time Elka went with the other men. They would cut down trees to make a clearing so that they could plant crops. They would make a huge fire to burn the trees they had cut down. One day, as they were watching the fire, someone remarked, “witchdoctors can be like a burning field. A fire is awesome when it is good. It helps to clear a field so that people can plant yams. Witchdoctors are awesome too. They can be good when they blow their breath to cure the sick. A fire can also be bad. It can burn a house down, or burn a child that gets too close. Witchdoctors, like fire, could also be destructive.

Elka could not stop thinking about this – about witchcraft – the good and the bad. The thoughts burned in his mind, as the great fire had burned in the field. Elka had been irresistibly drawn to witchcraft when a sorcerer came to his village of Big Rocks during his boyhood. When his stepfather Tumika fell ill, the witchdoctor Mafolio was called.

“Only a witchdoctor with many charms can save him,” said the headman.

The village people feared Mafolio because he was so close to the spirit world, but they liked him too. He limited his practice to deeds of helpfulness. He travelled up and down the rivers and small streams. People constantly called him to come and heal their sick.

Normally when a witchdoctor arrived in a village, the children of the village were sent some distance away because it was believed that the children could suffer bad effects from the evil spirits. Elka, now a teenager, wanted to find out more about the witchdoctor, so hid behind the trees so as not to be sent away.

Shouts were coming from the river. Mafolio must be nearing the landing.

“The one who blows good is arriving,” someone said. People rushed out of the houses to greet him. Peeping out from a tree trunk Elka saw that Mafolio had draped himself with chest bands made from animal skins. He wore a feather crown on his head and carried a basket of charms. As Mafolio leapt from the canoe Elka could see that he was very old, yet he seemed as agile as a boy.

The procession passed near Elka’s tree. Elka bent low, wedging himself in a network of roots, yet managing to keep sight of what was happening. Mafolio had a contagious laugh, and chewed and spat tobacco as he walked. The sorcerer reached the tree behind which Elka hid. The old fellow spattered it generously with dark brown tobacco juice. His laugh was even louder; he knew the boy was there. Now close up, Elka found his appearance hideous. His face was deeply lined. Three toes were missing on one foot. He had a ghastly infection on the other foot, causing him to hobble. His

arms and legs were covered with scaly white sores. “How could a great man be so ugly?” thought Elka. Yet this was the great Mafolio.

Elka wanted to see and hear more. The procession passed into the village clearing. Elka left his hiding place and made his way stealthily, keeping within the shadow of the big house. Elka swung himself up onto a cassava drying rack and watched to see what would happen next.

A few men were sent into the forest to fetch a particular type of palm branch. Other men dug shallow holes in a circle. When the men brought back the palm it was split into straight poles and dropped into the holes, then brought together and tied at the top. Finally palm leaves were attached to the frame. Mafolio now had a *shurifana*, a witchdoctor’s house, in which to work in private over his patient.

Tumika was carried from the big house, passed through the opening, and then the leaves were put back in place. What went on inside was strictly between the witchdoctor, his patient and the spirits.

“The one in the *shurfana* will blow hard,” said Elka’s old uncle. He is really stuck fast to Kworokyam.”

Kworokyam was the centre of Wai Wai spirit life. Not a person, not a legendary hero, not an individual spirit, in the sense that each animal had its individual spirit. Kworokyam was all the spirits of the Wai Wai world wrapped into one all-powerful supernatural being. At the mention of his name Elka felt a sudden chill, a stabbing fear

in the pit of his stomach. He wished he had not been so eager to eavesdrop.

Kworokyam could be bad or good. He caused sickness, yet he was the one whom a witchdoctor called upon for a cure. Elka knew that he was mostly bad. In this world, where every animal, every insect, every rock or tree had a spirit to be reckoned with; the greater number of spirits, by far, were evil. Kworokyam had no body of his own. Sometimes he showed himself in the massive constricting coils of the anaconda, sometimes in the body of a man. At times he lived at the bottom of the river. Nearly always he walked the jungle trails by night. He could be heard in the fluttery whoosh of a vampire bat, the thunderous roar of the howler monkeys, the crackling of a tree falling after the rain – these all told of Kworokyam’s presence. Man had a spirit too. But it had no relation to Kworokyam unless the man was a witchdoctor. On occasions, Kworokyam and the witchdoctor joined to become a single being, whether for good or for evil.

Elka had an idea. If he listened while Mafolio worked his charms, perhaps he could learn some of the songs that were part of witchcraft. He slipped from his hammock in the big house and moved quietly to the shadowy side of the *shurifana*. From inside the sorcerer’s house came an incantation:

Come little water dog, come, come,

Spirit of the otter, come –

Ah yai, ah yai, ah yai,

Come and take away my brother's hurt.

Elka sat listening to the eerie song, then to another, then to another. He had never heard such songs before! One was to the bush chicken, one was to the bush hog and another was to the loathsome anaconda. Elka put his ear to the leaf wall and heard the groans of his stepfather, and the *koosh koosh* – the sound of Mafolia blowing smoke from some hot stones onto Tumika. He heard the rapid *pt-pt-pt* – the dry spitting over the spot where Tumika hurt the most.

At sundown, a villager bringing the children back from the fields, caught sight of him and hustled him off to his hammock. But it did not matter. By then Elka had heard enough to fire his imagination and interest in the spirit world. He awoke at dawn. Tumika was back in the big house, no better. Mafolio was up and making ready to leave. All that day Elka sang the songs he had learned through the leafy walls of the *Shufana*. He sang songs to the hummingbird, the bee and to the bush hog. Later in the day he went into the cane patch to work, still singing.

“What in the world are you singing?” asked old Kurum.

“I’m singing the songs of the spirits, the songs of Kworokyam. I got ears for them as I sat outside the *shurufan*.”

Kurum covered his eyes in terror.

“You must not sing those songs little boy!” Kurum whispered urgently. “Kworokyam will say to you, “You sing songs like a witchdoctor, but you are not a witchdoctor, so I will kill you!”

Elka stopped singing the spirit songs aloud. But he hummed and whistled them when alone. And almost all the time, day or night, he continued to sing them inside his head. He could not wipe from his mind the magic chants that Mafolio had unknowingly planted there. Elka began to find that sleep could no longer give him rest from the world of the spirits. Dreams were becoming a disturbing part of his world. One night, not quite knowing whether he was awake or asleep, he felt a tug on his hammock and heard the snorting of a pig.

“*Hee, hei. Yoko,*” he heard the pig say.

He tried to work out what the pig was saying, but then told himself not to bother because he did not understand pig language and to go back to sleep. But then, as if he were snatched again from pleasant slumber, he felt a rushing in front of his face. He tried to lift his arm to brush away the object, a hairy thing with no definable shape. Lifting his arm was a great effort, for it felt heavy and difficult to move. He struggled and finally brushed it away. In the light of the full moon he peered out and saw the pig that had pulled at his hammock. It had huge tusks. The pig smiled, as if to coax him a bit, and then all of a sudden the pig was not alone. Assembled beside it were a hummingbird, a giant anaconda and an armadillo. The pig motioned to him to listen.

“Sing the songs of Kworokyam,” the pig said in a tone of command.

“We will teach you,” the other animals joined in.

“No! No!” Elka tried to say. The words stuck in his throat. Only a groan came through his lips, and it was enough to wake him from his dream.

He was afraid to sleep again and waited out the night feeling alone and afraid. With the coming of dawn, he went to Mafolio, who was now living at Big Falls, and asked him about the dream.

“That was Kworokyam,” replied Mafolio. “Kworokyam reveals himself to whom he wills and in the way he wants,” he explained. “To you, he is in the wild pig.”

A few days after his dream he happened to meet the village granny down at the river landing. Pointing a stubby, crooked finger at Elka, she said, “You are the one who sings the spirit songs within you. Never mind how I know. I know. Little boy, someday you will be finding yourself – a witchdoctor!”

Chapter 3 White killers coming

While Elka dreamed of pigs controlled by evil spirits, hundreds of kilometres away three brothers with a special mission were planning a move that would bring them face to face with the Wai Wai. Their plan was to invade the devil’s territory, the Bible as their weapon. The Hawkins brothers – Neil age 33, Raider, 30 and Bob 26 – came from a strong Christian family, and had already served with the Unevangelized Field Mission, evangelizing the Macusi Indians of Brazil. They had seen their labor bear fruit, and Neil decided that with this experience they should go to the Wai Wai. Little was known about the tribe except that their villages straddled the

Guiana-Brazil border deep in impenetrable jungle, and that an occasional explorer gave a bad report of these people.

In 1948 it became possible to charter a plane to the interior, so they decided that the two-hour flight would be the best way to get there, rather than taking the water route down the river with its rapids and tree-strewn sections that would take three weeks to navigate. But it was not that easy. A Colonial official, believing that Christianity was not what the Wai Wai needed, refused to give them a permit to travel. However, by 1949 the commissioner left the post, and Neil and Bob were on their way for a 3-month stay, written permission in hand.

Paddling down the Mapuera River, they stopped to make some inquiries about the Wai Wai. They said that they wanted to visit the tribe. That caused word to be passed through the jungle that white men were coming. By the time the grapevine message had been spread to the village of Muyuva, the ‘white men’ had become ‘white killers’.

Not far from Big Falls was another village where a greatly feared witchdoctor Muyuwa, lived. Unlike Mafolio, who mainly used white magic to try to cure sickness, Muyuwa used black magic to do bad things to people. Mapari, the blood brother of Elka’s mother lived in Muyuwa’s village. Mapari walked the path to the Big Falls village to share the news that white killers were coming, and also decided that he would claim his nephew, Elka, and bring him back to live in his own village. When Elka heard the news he was terrified for he was afraid of Muyuwa’s black magic. But he was even more afraid of the white killers, so he hid. But Mapari found him and kept him

close to himself. After the evening meal, Mapari gathered the village folk around the fire and slowly started to share the news. He seemed no hurry to get on to it. So long as he kept it to himself he was the centre of attention. He combed his long hair and put on paint and feathers first, keeping everyone in suspense.

Finally he started to share the news.

“Ones with white skins are coming. These white ones are bad men. They come to kill the Wai Wai.”

A shriek came from an old woman, “We’ll all be the dying ones!”

“Wherever can we run to?” a little boy sobbed.

No sleep came to the village that night.

In the morning Mapari took Elka to the boat ready for the upriver journey.

In an undertone Elka said, “I don’t want to live near Muyuaw.”

He hoped the birds or the tapir had not heard that. Then, to cover up, in a louder voice he said, “I’m scared of white killers.”

“Why didn’t his uncle seem afraid?” Elka wondered. “Maybe his uncle and Muyuwa had come up with a plan to kill the whites before they could kill the Wai Wai. His people had arrows that could slay a jaguar, so why not a man with white skin? And the Wai Wai had other ways of killing. They know how to kill and smile at the same time.”

Years before, the Wai Wai had killed white rubber hunters that way. The story was well-known to Elka. Men had come into the forest seeking rubber. They brought knives and axes for trading. The Wai Wai at first looked on them as good ones, glad to have these foreigners living among them. Then one day they refused to give out more knives. They took Wai Wai women and mistreated them. After counsel, the Wai Wai men climbed tall trees and brought down a vine. They beat the vine on a rock to extract the milky liquid. This milky liquid was a poison that they used to catch fish. This day however it was to have a new use. The milky liquid was mixed with a sweet palm fruit drink.

The white visitors were called to drink and eat and sit down with the Wai Wai. The Wai Wai, smiling and talking, drank from a different pot. The hunters drained their bowls and suddenly slumped over. The poison had paralyzed them. The Wai Wai men grabbed their war clubs and killed the men. Worried white friends came looking for the men. They too were served the palm fruit drink spiced with poison. They were also killed. After that, no more white men came.

As Elka canoed towards his new village with his uncle, Elka wondered about strange world of the white men, and the *kok kok* of a tree frog told him that there would be conflicts between the two worlds.

Chapter 4 A trap for every man

Elka and his uncle went as far as the dwindling river could take them. They tied their canoe to a small tree, placed their belongings

and some food in their woven carry basket, and struck out on the path that led over the high mountains. Elka had moved from village to village before, but this move proved to be a turning point in his life. They were heading for the village called Old Baking Plate. Elka was afraid. He feared both the wicked Muyuwa and the coming of the white men. He was unhappy over leaving his home at Big Falls, his friends and his favourite forest spots.

The trail was rugged and uncertain. Together the two scrambled over rocks and moss-covered fallen trees; they slogged through muck, waded waist-deep across mountain streams, climbed up and slip down vine-strewn hills – sensing rather than seeing the way. As they moved ahead slowly and almost painfully, Elka grew to like – just a little – his uncle whom he had at first despised.

At the end of the trail was a canoe. In it they paddled down river. As they rounded a bend, a high bank loomed before them. The path to Old Baking Plate village started here, and they now had to get to the village before dark. Almost there, they stopped just long enough to put fresh paint on their faces. Moving on, they shouted and struck the sides of the canoe to alert the villagers of their coming. However no one came to greet them. Elka followed Mapari up the forested hill toward the village. When he reached the clearing at the top and looked across in the dusk, he could see that Old Baking Plate was much like other villages he had known. Its communal house however was older and larger than the one at Big Falls. One side sagged; it seemed dangerously near collapse. Going inside he saw more family fires than his former house had contained and many more hammocks. Finding an empty spot

beside a fire, he tied his own hammock between posts. He sat down in it and looked around.

As his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness he was able to recognize some of those gathered around the evening cooking fires. They were people who had been moved from Big Rocks shortly after Elka had been taken to Big Falls. Kurum was there, the man who had warned Elka about singing the songs of the witchdoctor. His daughter, Ahmuri had been Elka's playmate as a child. She was two years younger than Elka. Now thirteen, she had grown very attractive. Her breasts were large and rounded. When stood up, Elka could see that her middle was too.

"She carries your Unlce Mapari's child," a villager explained.

"Is she his wife?" Elka asked.

"Yes," came the reply. "But the young men don't seem to know it."

Although there was some sense of ownership of one's wife, it was customary for men and women to trade or loan out marriage partners. Ahmuri was now bent over her fire, blowing on it. Her gaze was not at the fire; she was looking over at Elka. Their eyes met. She flashed him a smile of recognition, then quickly turned in search of more fuel. Elka felt comfortable inside. Her eyes had kindled more warmth than any fire had done.

On his first morning at Old Baking Plate, Elka entered the communal workhouse to do his face painting and preening. He noticed a handsome young man who sat on a stool carving arrow points.

Yukuma, perhaps a few years older than Elka, was his cousin, the son of Mapari. He seemed friendly and offered to take Elka hunting.

“You will need to keep up with me,” Yukuma said, “I’m pretty fast on the trail. And my arrows get most of the birds.”

On their first hunt together, Yukuma tumbled two brown monkeys and a toucan from the tops of the trees. Yukuma was better at hunting than Elka, and Elka envied him for it. Not only that, Yukuma was stronger and more handsome than Elka, and brought a smile to Ahmuri’s face. Elka still looked more like a boy than a man. The stinging ants had made him stronger, but so far they had done little to make him attractive. A front tooth had rotted away, giving him an awkward grin. But his faith in the ants remained unshaken. Someday, Ahmuri would pay attention to him and think of him as more than just a little boy with whom she had played.

Elka began to enjoy life at Old Baking Plate. He discovered the favourite feeding places of wild pigs. In the river he discovered new rapids for shooting fish. Up and down this stream he paddled, finding the watering holes of tapirs and sometimes nests of giant anacondas. Elka was not fond of Yukuma, who always boasted of his own strength and abilities. Elka missed his friends from Big Falls, but soon he had a companion again in his younger brother, Yakuta. The boy was brought to this side of the mountains by their sister and her husband not long after Elka’s own arrival.

Elka did not hunt and fish every day. Other times he cut trees, repaired canoes, restrung his bow and carved new arrow points. The women cut the firewood, harvested cassava, carried water and

prepared meals. He found the villagers at Baking Plate obsessed in their talk with one subject: the coming of the white killer. Some of the men said that they would fight. Others were resigned to dying, and some hoped the white men might have trading possibilities – precious tiny glass beads which the Wai Wai used as a kind of currency. They would get as many as they could before dying.

Communal living had its benefits, but closeness of living together led to cheating. Food was common property; if the catch of fish was small, Elka, like others, might eat it on the river rather than taking it back to the house to share. If the cheating was found out however, someone would use witchcraft to punish the offender. Elka was particularly interested in the sorcerer’s role in witchcraft. Ordinary folk, though not possessed with Kworokyam, could manipulate the spirits to some degree. Anyone could cast a spell by blowing his breath on the belongings of one he did not like, causing that person to fall seriously ill. And anyone could ‘eat’ another’s spirit by hanging up one of their belongings in a prickly palm tree, causing its owner to die. However, one hesitated to ‘eat’ a spirit because of *farawa*, the dreaded ceremony of revenge. By magic, it killed the one who had killed.

Elka hoped he would never be caught in the web of *farawa*. But that was not his only worry. He feared the jungle for its spiritual terrors. He feared everything unusual such as a banana that had grown double, a fish with peculiar spotting. Were they not omens of the spirits’ ill-temper? He feared ‘spirit eating’ and feared the uncertainty that lay beyond death.

Through trading the skins of animals that he had shot, Elka accumulated many strings of beads, one of the Wai Wai yardsticks of wealth. One day his cousin Yukuma challenged him:

“You have red beads,” he said. “I like red beads.”

Elka knew he wanted them.

“What is your payment?” asked Elka.

“I don’t have any,” said Yukuma. Then in a whisper, “Will your old beads protect your spirit when I eat it?”

With nervous hands Elka unwound the beads from his neck and handed them to Yukuma. If the fruits of labour should so easily vanish, why should he work to gain them?

Elka wished that Ahmuri was his wife. She was, of course, Mapari’s wife. But she made it plain that she did not love Mapari who was much too old for her. Although she was the mother of his newborn daughter, she acted more like a housemaid than a wife. Ahmuri showed some response towards Elka’s kind words – evidently the ants had made him at least a little more attractive. When Elka brought her the meat of wild pigs and bush turkeys, she cooked it over her fire and gave it back to him, in spite of her husband. Yukuma also wanted Ahmuri as his wife. Already he had taken her younger sister as his wife. He was living under the same roof with Ahmuri and she was cooking his meat. It appeared that Yukuma always got what he wanted.

A big party was planned. Invitations would be sent to distant parts, even over the high mountains. The invitation took the form of a

string tied in several knots. The knots represented the number of days before the party was to start. If the invitation was accepted, a knot would be untied to mark the passing of each day until the party.

Men hunted and women baked huge stacks of cassava bread in preparation. By chewing the bread and spitting it into a pot, and later soaking the mash, they produced enormous quantities of fermented drink.

The party consisted of wrestling, dancing and plenty of drinking. Elka was good at dancing and he impressed many with his rhythmic foot stamping. Muyuwa, the witchdoctor came down from his village for the dances at Old Baking Plate. Muyuwa began to come often to Old Baking Plate, for business and for dancing. He taught the Wai Wai the dance of the anaconda, which he said he had witnessed long ago at the bottom of the river.

“Teach it to the Wai Wai,” the huge serpent had told him. And the witchdoctor did. From time to time the tribe danced it, as a ritual honouring Kwororkyam.

Elka knew he lived in the midst of badness. He could see it all around him. It filled his stomach with pains. Yet what could he do? He was just a young man not long in his arm bands. What could anyone do? A thief, he knew, was held up to ridicule when caught. That was a way to control stealing. For killing there was retaliation. For wife stealing, you could always take the wife of the man who had taken yours.

“How ever in the world can you do good?” Elka asked himself.

It was a heavy stone that pressed down on his stomach, a trap every man lived in. Was there no way to throw off the stone, to escape the trap? Maybe, for him, he thought, the answer lay in witchcraft. Maybe in time he would join the ranks of the sorcerers. Maybe he could be a witchdoctor who did only good.

That night after Elka fell asleep in his hammock, the spirit of the wild pigs found him. He dreamed that he and the villagers had tracked the bush hog into the palms and surrounded them. One pig had separated from the pack. Elka ran after him. Just as he lifted his bow to aim, the pig looked up at him and spoke:

“Little brother, why do you want to shoot me? I am one you ought not to shoot.”

Elka lowered his bow. The talking pig nodded his head in thanks and ran off.

Elka woke in a sweat, at first thinking that it really happened. When dawn came, Yukuma and Elka went hunting, following the scent of a pack of wild pigs. Sure enough, the fat pig stood apart from the pack. Elka raised his bow for a shot that no Indian boy ought to miss. His arrow went wide and missed the pig. The pig stood still, baring its ugly teeth. Elka shot again, this time the arrow going clean over the pig’s head, hitting a tree. The pig ran away. Elka was deeply troubled. The pig in the flesh looked just like the pig in his dream. It was as if the pig of his dream was holding him to his word. Did the spirit of the wild pig have a claim on him?

“Why couldn’t I shoot him? Elka later asked Kurum.

“I don’t know,” said Kurum.

But Elka knew that he had committed himself to the pig’s spirit and through him to Kworokyam. Maybe the deliberate singing of the songs had done it. He did not want to be a witchdoctor. Yet he did. There was only one question remaining: How long would it be before he became Kworokyam’s? He was to know the answer to that by the time of the next full moon.

The pig came to Elka again in a dream.

“I want you to be a witchdoctor,” the creature, now part pig and part man, said to him. “When you are one with me you will not at me, except for a tiny piece along my back. If you eat more of me than this, I will eat your spirit. If you neglect me, you will also die.”

Elka was shaking when he woke up. He ran to Mapari’s hammock.

“Uncle, the pigs have talked to me again!”

His Uncle sat up.

“It was Kworokyam you saw. He appeared to you as a pig,” said Mapari.

“Uncle, I’m scared!” was all Elka could say.

“I’m one who knows Kworokyam somewhat,” his uncle said with satisfaction. “I blow to cure when no greater one is around, I will make you a witchdoctor. Now go to sleep until dawn and we will attend to it then.”

With his pulse beating strong and fast in Elka's stomach, he could not sleep. He was frightened of the experience of being made a witchdoctor, which he knew was coming with the dawn of another day.

Chapter 5 To the sky and back

Morning came. Elka helped his uncle build a witchdoctor's house.

"We'll use it when we get to the sky," his uncle explained. This meant the two of them would enter the small doorless, windowless shelter, after singing the necessary songs to transport them into ecstasy, and would enter the strange land of the spirits. It was where witchdoctors learned in what spot in a sick body there was hurt, and how it could be got out.

Before going to the sky however, there was a preliminary ceremony involving the villagers. Elka and Mapari sat on stools in front of the big house while a gathering of people watched.

"Let your mind be filled with many spirits ... not just the bush hog, but also the anaconda, the vampire bat, the vulture and the giant fish," Mapari told Elka. "The more animal spirits you have the better, and Kworokyam will be please with you."

Elka nodded. He would make friends with all the spirits. He would collect small stones by the river, each stone representing an animal spirit.

Then Mapari began the tobacco ceremony. He took out a large dried leaf from his basket of paraphernalia, and breaking it into small pieces, he handed the tobacco out to the spectators. He told

them to crush it and suck it, and enjoy a tiny touch of Kworokyam. Then the old man took from his basket two rolls of tobacco. Lighting the ends of these he gave one to the granny and took one himself. The two smokers puffed smoke towards Elka. Elka turned away to catch his breath. The two old servants had breathed into Elka the spirits of many animals. The sun started to set and it was time for Mapari and Elka to enter the witchdoctor's dark hut. There the old man gave Elka the tiny stones that corresponded to the animal spirits. Mapari drew from his basket a headdress made from feathers of the wild crane and chest bands made from pig's bristles. After putting them on, Elka joined Mapari in smoking the tobacco. Mapari asked Elk if he knew any spirit songs, and of course Elka did. They sang and smoked together, and then Mapari announced that they were ready to go to the sky.

Fear gnawed in the pit of Elka's stomach. His fingers and toes tingled. His head was spinning crazily. The light was growing dimmer and at last it went out. Elka did not know what had happened but he just knew that he went to the sky. After Mapari and Elka left the witchdoctor house, the old granny wanted to know of Elka's experience.

"We saw people there, little people," he told her. "Some with brown skins, some black and some white. I saw the anaconda and many bush hogs. Mapari told me that these would be my special animal spirits."

The old granny nodded, her toothless face gleeful. She had been to the sky once, and here was someone who had shared her rare experience.

While Elka's own body was gone in blissful, yet rather terrifying, close company with the spirits, Kworokyam had taken over his body.

"Oh little boy," the old granny soothsayer said grinning, "you *are* one of Korokyam's. He has great things in store for you."

That night in his dreams he walked the trail of the bush hogs and sang the song of the vulture.

"Elka is one of ours now," the wild animals sang.

"I'm a real witchdoctor now," Elka said aloud, and with the start of a new day he was determined to be a good witchdoctor and not one who harmed people.

Chapter 6 Changes for Elka

Elka had been to the sky. Momentous things were happening to him, but most of the villagers just carried on with the feasting and partying, now two months after the beginning of the dance of the anaconda. Before the dance ended, the white invaders came.

Some months beforehand some of the Wai Wai had gone out to stay in the savannas. Two of the Wai Wai men, who had gone to the savannas, now arrived in a canoe. Elka heard the knocking of the canoe paddles, a sign that they were not the enemy, and ran down the steep path to the river. In the canoe, with the Wai Wai men, sat a pair of tall thin figures with white skin, though Elka could see little of it; clothes and what looked like bowls on their heads nearly covered them.

Elka shouted a warning up the path. One woman gathered up her precious dogs and ran into the woods. Some villagers scattered into the thickly forested hillside where they could look without being seen. Muyuwa, the witchdoctor, walked down the path to the river, and braver ones followed him. Elka was uneasy but tried to hide his fear. He was amazed that the two Wai Wai Indians had traveled with the white men, and seemed unafraid. One of them spoke to Muyuwa and then the chief, smiling graciously, welcomed the white pair. Had Muyuwa been reassured about the white men? He was already accepting fish hooks from them!

The old chief was actually laughing. It was evident that he thought the newcomers were harmless. Now he was leading them up the path to the big house in the clearing. More puzzled than alarmed, Elka fell into the line filing up the hill. Once they reached the village, one Wai Wai after another emerged from hiding. Women produced food and drink. The white men inspected hammocks and other household items with interest.

Two costumed dancers spiraled into the big house to put on a show. But who wanted to look at the dancers when they could look at people with white skins? Admitting defeat, the dancers retired. Elka fixed his eyes on the strange visitors. If they had come to kill, where were their weapons? They had neither clubs nor axes. He had noticed a gun in the canoe, like the ones used by some for hunting wild pigs, but they had not bothered to bring it up the hill.

The newcomers, he could see, were trying hard to please. They smiled and said Wai Wai words like *kiriwanhi* – "wonderful". Why should they want to please the Wai Wai? Why, being killers, had

they not struck fear into the ones who brought them? One of the paddlers from the savannas understood a little English, and had therefore been chosen to be the white men's guide. Elka edged forward to listen, while the paddler told their story ...

"We were afraid at first. Our spirits almost left us. We cut our stay on the savannas short when we heard the white killers were coming. We pulled hard on our paddles and raced to get home. But the white men in their own canoe, were able to travel faster than us. We had to stop for food. They did not because they carried food with them. The white men caught up with the Wai Wai men at a rock on the river. The white men explained that it was not the spirits of the Wai Wai they wanted to catch, but their 'talk'. The white men produced little papers from somewhere, and when we spoke they made marks on the papers. We learned that the white men had names – Mr. Neil Hawkins, who we called Mistokin (sounding like Mister Hawkins), and Bob, who we called Bahm. We learned that they were brothers, and a third brother, Rader, was coming later. We asked why they had come. They told us they had come to tell us about God. But we didn't know who God was. Was God coming on their trail? Does God have a wife? Would God kill us when we drop our guard? We had little sleep that night. We kept getting up to check the fire, just to keep an eye on the white men. After three days of paddling with the white men we could see that they would do us no harm so we said we would help them." And that was the end of his tale.

In the following days Elka found himself strangely drawn to the white brothers. He helped them to catch Wai Wai words, an activity

they pursued relentlessly day after day. They only took time out to cook and eat the meat the hunters brought them. They made many papers talk back to them, and sometimes turned their faces to the sky or the ground with closed eyes to speak to someone the Wai Wai could not see.

They took an interest in everything the Wai Wai did. One day Bahm took something as sharp as a palm thorn and gently stuck it into the arm of a sick man. The man screamed, but in a day or so he seemed to be well. What next would these strange ones produce?

Raider, the third brother, finally arrived, and was given the name Mlayla. Immediately Bahm and Mlayla decided to take a trip over the mountains to find more Wai Wai. They asked for mountain guides and pack-carriers. Elka volunteered, but reluctantly because he knew the trail was hard. On the way Elka became sick. He had a high fever and then shook with a chill. He would have unpacked his charms and blown his breath on his stones, over himself, but Bahm happened to come by first.

"I've got medicine for you," Bahm said.

Despite his fears, Elka decided to trust Bahm and took the small white pebbles that Bahm took out from his pack. Bahm explained how to swallow the pebbles. Elka did as he was told.

"If it doesn't work, I'll stick you tomorrow," Bahm said.

The next day, Elka was well. Bahm's charms had worked. But never would he let Bahm stick him, he vowed. He would rather die first.

After taking Bahm and Mlayla to the Mapuera River headwaters, Elka returned to Old Baking Plate. Back home he again helped Mistokin with his words. One day Mistokin asked the people to gather together. He said he had caught enough Wai Wai words to tell them about God. He told them that God had made them, and in the world there were two ways – one leading to God, and one leading away from Him.

Elka was puzzling over Mistokin's words, when Bahm and Mlayla returned. Then one day all three said goodbye to Elka. They wanted to go down the river to see other Wai Wai.

The white men's visit provided endless days of talk in the village.

"Muyuwa is happy they came," said one.

For favours the old witchdoctor had done for the white men, he had been given more beads, a red-handled knife and a new hoe to till the ground.

Others, however were not so certain in their judgements. What was the purpose of the white men's coming? Of their catching Wai Wai words? What were they trying to teach?

Elka sat in his hammock and asked a perplexing question:

"They talked about God. Who is God?"

"I saw Mistoken, Bahm and Mlayla go into the forest once," said another, "They sat on their knees, closed their eyes and talked to someone above them. Is he in the treetops?"

The Wai Wai had asked Mistoken about God's family.

"He has no mother or father," one recalled. "Just a Son – *Chisusu*, Jesus."

"I remember they said that men drove spikes through the Son's hands; spikes like those of the pimple palm," said the guide from the savannas. The others shuddered. "They said that Jesus died because He would not stop loving us. What kind of love is that? Not Wai Wai love."

The Wai Wai loved a child because someday he would grow up to hunt meat for a parent, or to cook it. They loved for what love could give them.

Just as Elka had feared, sickness spread through Old Baking Plate. It came in from the savannas, with the few adventurous men who had paddled the white brothers out of the jungle. The paddlers came back hot; their stomachs pained; they spat up blood. Elka's uncle was the first to die. Mapari had not wanted to make the trip, but Ahmuri insisted that her old husband go and earn a knife, so he went. No sooner had he returned than his germs spread through the village and his tortured old body perished.

The wailing for Mapari began. Before it ended, the village headman died. Muyuwa and Elka sped from one hammock to another to blow on the sick. They had no time to build a witchdoctor's house. They just took their stones and tobacco to the side of anyone who writhed in his bed. All the while he sang to the spirit of the tree frog, or of the mosquito or of the bush hog – especially to the spirit of the bush hog.

Elka longed for sleep. However, even in the brief periods when he lay in his hammock, sleep sometimes would not come. His mind would not rest. He thought of the nightmare they were living. He used all his fingers to count the dead. The count spilled over to his toes. So it went on for many months, sickness and dying. Life in the village went on as best it could, improving as the disease gradually abated.

Now that he was a witchdoctor Elka often saw wild pigs in his dreams. He was able to tell others where the wild pigs would be, although he always left the killing of the pigs to others. Fisherman brought their fish hooks and fish traps to Elka to blow on, so that they could procure a fine catch.

Elka now travelled to other villages where death and sickness had struck. The people built him witchdoctor houses in which he went to the sky to find the cures for their sufferings. He blew through long nights. He blew until his throat was dry and his body ached from fatigue. But his strength always returned. It was becoming increasingly clear that the stinging ants had worked to make him a skillful healer. His fame grew. His influence with the spirits became known far over the high mountains.

The plague in the village brought three big changes to his life. First came a wife, second, new standing with Yukuma and third, new regard by his people.

As the disease began to run its course, Elka found time to go hunting with Kurum.

One day Kurum said to him, "Little brother, your uncle Mapari, the husband of my daughter, has died. Would you consider having Ahmuri as your wife?"

Trying not to look over enthusiastic, he quietly said, "Yes, I would like to have her."

Elka loved Ahmuri and he was sure she liked him, at least more than she did her old husband. But there was Yukuma to think of. He knew that Yukuma would be jealous.

"Shall I be with you?" Elka asked Ahmuri in the communal house a short time later. He hoped she would say yes.

She drew a deep breath and stood up. Without another sound she untied her hammock, walked to the other side of the house and strung her hammock below Elka's. This made them husband and wife.

But Yukuma was not one to give up easily.

"Elka has taken the woman I want for a wife," he complained. He went about muttering threats. He said he would put an arrow in Elka's stomach. One day when Elka came back from hunting, his younger brother Yakuta warned him not to lie in his hammock.

"Yukuma blew on it while you were gone," he said.

"He wants to kill me!" said Elka angrily.

Elka decided to have it out with Yukuma. When working outside, Elka confronted Yukuma and asked, "Why did you blow on my hammock? Don't you like me? I like you. Why don't you like me?"

“I didn’t blow on your hammock,” said Yukuma.

Elka replied that people had seen him blowing, and demanded to know if Yukuma had gone even further and practiced spirit-eating.

“It is bad to me that you blew,” Elka said, his anger mounting. “Now I want to kill you.”

He picked up a solid stick, gripped it tightly and a dark look came over his face. Never before had he really wanted to kill anyone.

Yukuma took a step backward, speaking in genuine terror.

“I didn’t blow on you to make you die,” he said, “only to make you unattractive to women. But I don’t want that now. I want to like you, and for you to like me.”

Elka relaxed his hold on the stick. His desire to kill, nearly all-consuming, passed quickly and there was reconciliation. It was a relief to him that Tukuma sought to heal their breach.

“All right,” said Elka, and he threw his stick down. The two walked back to the village, taking different paths. Elka had gained new status with Yukuma, and now he knew that Ahmuri belonged to him.

Because of the death of their leader, the people of Old Baking Plate were leaderless. Because of this the people wanted to move. Some wanted to go across the high mountains and live on the Mapuera River. Some said they would like to see Mistokin and his brothers. Would they come back to Old Baking Plate only to find the house empty?

It was all set. The next morning the village people would start on their journey. But the night before, Elka had a dream. Before him stood a white man like Bahm.

“Don’t go over the high mountains. Stay here,” the man told him.

Elka woke up the people to tell them of his dream.

“If that’s what you dreamed, then we had better not go,” they said in amazement.

Plans for the exodus were scrapped before dawn came.

Soon after, the village people were invited to a drinking party at Deep Eddy, where Muyuwa was living. The invitation was accepted and the canoes set off for Deep Eddy. After the party, Elka took his people to a site he had long thought suitable for a village. It was half a day’s paddling downstream from Deep Eddy. It was a level area with a pleasant rock landing.

“Here is where we will build our house and cut our fields next dry season,” said Elka. The people agreed. Their leaderless days were over. Elka was now their village headman.

“First, though,” he continued, we’ll go back to Baking Plate and gather the food growing there.”

“The old house has fallen,” someone in the group said.

“But the yams are good,” Elka said. “We’ll go there and make shelters for our hammocks. And someday we’ll come back here and build our village. We’ll call it Yaka Yaka.” It was the name of his favourite banana.

Chapter 7 Excuse for failure

A year after their first visit, Mistokin and Bahm returned to Old Baking Plate and found Elka and his people there, harvesting the fields they had abandoned earlier. Elka, for one, was glad to see them. They helped turn back sickness with their white pebbles and the juice squirted from a shiny thorn. It was good magic, Elka thought. More and more he was drawn to them. He helped them to “catch words” in his language. He had been amazed at first that they could not talk Wai Wai, but then he was amazed at how quickly these ignorant ones were learning.

Elka was learning something too. Bahm and Mistokin had a bundle of papers wrapped in black leather – a Bible – which they made talk back to them every day. ‘God’s paper’, they called it in Wai Wai. They wanted Elka to help them put it in his language, and as he helped, he began to find out what it had to say.

“The Paper talks about God,” they said to him. “It tells how God made the trees and the rocks and the sun.”

Had God made the sun? Elka wondered. Elka had not known anyone who had made the sun. God’s Paper said that God made the first man, breathed into his nostrils and he began to live. That was strange. It was the Wai Wai who did the blowing here, to keep alive or kill.

“God loves the creatures He made,” Bahm explained. Elka was impressed with their teaching because of the way they lived – he saw them as “different ones”. They did not steal Wai Wai women.

He found this hard to understand, especially since some of the women invited them to be stolen.

Chirimoso was a witchdoctor known to Elka. He led a small village tucked away near a stream of the Mapuera River. Although old, he decorated himself like a young man, with feathers in his nose and plumes in his armbands. He loved crowds. He had accepted the invitation to the last drinking-dancing party held at Old Baking Plate, where he had heard the teaching of the white visitors. Chirimoso told Elka that he had heard about God “just a little bit” when Bahm and his brother had stopped in his house on their trip down the Mapuera River the year before. He liked the little he had heard and now he wanted to hear much more.

While Chirimoso was at baking Plate one of his two wives died. He buried her with no great regret, because after all, she was old. Then his younger wife fell sick. Chirimoso sat by her hammock and used on her all the charms in his collection. He asked Mistokin and Bahm to use theirs.

“If Bahm’s medicine makes her well,” he said to Elka, “I’ll become a companion of Jesus. But if it fails, I will go back to my village and strive to know Kworokyam better.”

Sickness had spread widely. Bahm himself fell ill and the old woman of the village came around to his hammock and told him that he would die. But Mistokin nursed his brother back to health. Then the two white brothers put in a great effort to save Chirimoso’s wife. One day they used the last of their medicine. Elka saw Mistokin sit on his knees day after day and plead for her healing. But the young

wife died. Bahm, who buried her, appeared so sad that it made Elka feel sad too. Lonely old Chirimoso went back over the trail to his home.

In the days and weeks that followed, Mistokin and Bahm did not appear to blame God. They worked harder than ever to help the Wai Wai throw off their fear and become God's people. But an incident at Baking Plate soon revealed that they were far from this. At sundown an old woman who had been at the edge of a clearing, streaked into the house crying "murderers!" Enemies were coming to take revenge.

The men got their arrows ready. They knew that Mistokin had a gun.

"Get your gun, Mistokin," pleaded Yukuma, amidst the excited babble.

Mistokin did not move. Instead, he told them to be quiet and speak one at a time, and to tell him what was going on.

"If only Muyuwa with his black magic was here," thought Elka. "If only I had listened more carefully when Muyuwa explained his black magic."

Mistokin and Bahm still did not move. They said that they had not come to kill but to tell of God's love for all the Wai Wai, not just those at Old Baking Plate.

How foolish, thought Elka, to let love interfere in the pursuit of an enemy.

Mistokin agreed to go with them in search of the invaders but he refused to take his gun. After hours of searching, he convinced them that there were no men lurking in the bush, and their hysteria had come from the imaginings of an old woman. Once during the night, panic broke out again. Misokin got up and talked to them in calm stern tones, speaking their native language.

"If you had God living in you, you would not be so afraid. It's bad for you to want to shoot people," he went on, "Your sour drink has caused you to see and hear people in the forest who are not there. Now let's get some sleep."

The people wondered why Elka let a foreigner speak to them in this way. It was 'bossy' and not acceptable to them. But Elka said nothing. He remembered hearing from God's Paper about "the fear of the wicked." Mistokin had told him that evil deeds had consequences and brought fear. Maybe they were afraid of the consequences of their deeds. No doubt, someone had killed and now was afraid of being killed. He remembered too that Bahm had said their badness would have to go before they could forget their fears. And only God could take badness away.

The missionaries talked straight and emphatically – not like the Wai Wai whose speech was filled with hints and veiled threats. They read from God's Paper with words of authority. They spoke out against many things that nobody had ever challenged the tribe before. They said that God did not like people to kill innocent babies. And since the missionaries came the killing of babies had stopped.

But Mistokin and Bahm spoke against more than killing. They stood up against stealing. Mistoin had challenged Yukuma on the stealing of some knives and axe heads, and Mistoken had returned them to the owner. This made Yukuma angry. But Elka knew that Mistokin was right. Like most people, Elka could readily see where fault lay in others. He could see that Yukuma was bad, but what about himself? Suddenly Elka hung his head. Yukuma was bad, but wasn't he bad too? Hadn't he done many of the bad things that Yukuma had done? Elka felt uncomfortable inside. For the first time, a Wai Wai admitted personal guilt, even though at this point he saw "just a little" badness in himself.

A crowd gathered at the sound of Yukuma's angry voice. Bahm spoke to the people:

"God made Himself known to you, by these trees, this river and the sky. But you have turned your backs on Him. Instead of serving God, you have chosen to serve the things he has made. You are not alone in turning away from God. People in my country turn their backs on God too. Once I was like you. But someone told me that God loved me and wanted to take my badness away. I stopped turning my back on Him. Now I've come to tell you that God loves you too. He wants to take away your badness so you can be His children."

But this message brought only resentment. Only Elka seemed to be getting ears. He was beginning to understand that while God loved them, He had a standard to maintain. Some days later Yukuma told Elka that he would not go when the missionaries called them together for a lesson. He was tired of listening to God's Paper. It said too many bad things about him.

Then the terrible day came when the men talked of killing their teachers. Bahm had hired a number of Wai Wai, including Elka, to go with him nearly a day's paddling downstream, to turn a small natural clearing into an airstrip. The men filled potholes to create a strip. They camped near the river at night. The task was hardly begun when one morning the men in camp awoke in a grumbling mood.

"What are you going to pay us?" asked one.

"And when?" chimed in another.

Bahm admitted that his supply of beads, knives, axes and hoes was low. He said there would be plenty for all when they had the field built and the first sky canoe came sweeping down. Bahm thought nothing more of it and moved off towards the field. The men, however, stayed behind, complaining about their lot. Not only did he not give them the knives and axes they had been promised, but they didn't like to hear him talk.

"He says there's badness inside us," one said.

They recalled the white rubber hunters who had been friendly at first to the Wai Wai and then abused them.

"You wait," said another, "Bahm and Mistokin will stop giving us things someday and will eat our spirits."

Most of them agreed. Hadn't they heard a long time ago that the white men came into the forest to kill them?

“Hmm, I don’t know about this,” Elka said. Now that he knew Bahm and Mistokin, and knew why they came, he trusted them and was ready to defend them against tribesmen’s threats. Bahm and Mistokin were not to be feared but to be listened to and observed. Shaking his head in disapproval, Elka picked up his axe and headed for the path. The others fell in behind. He heard them talk as they walked.

“Our fathers fed fish poison to the rubber hunters,” one said.
“Mistokin and Bahm drink our juice, so maybe ...”

As they talked, a plan began to take shape. They had no fish poison, but their plans did not require it. By the time they had reached the airstrip under construction, they had agreed on the details.

The Wai Wai were strangely cheerful as they went about their work – all, that is, except Elka. He was troubled, first that they should want to kill Bahm, and second that he would let them. They joked and laughed as they cut part-way through the smaller trees. One expert cutter moved to a big tree and cut it, so that it would tumble the other partly-cut trees to the ground. They maneuvered Bahm into a spot where the underbrush was thick, and where quick movements were impossible, while they themselves found excuse to move to higher ground. The laughing stopped and the men stood tense. One of them called to Bahm to distract him. He looked up.

“What did you say?” he yelled.

But there was no reply. Behind Bahm the axman had made his final swing. The giant tree wavered a second, then started its fateful

plunge to the jungle floor. As it began to fall, Elka choked with alarm. He had known about the plot but had not stopped the men.

“Bahm! Bahm!” he screamed.

Bahm did not hear him in the thunder of the fall. Or maybe Elka called too late. The giant tree and a dozen smaller trees covered the spot where Bahm had stood. All was deathly silent.

“Guess we killed Bahm,” murmured one of the plotters coolly. The silence was momentary. A startled bird found its voice and screeched as it circled overhead. Through the din of the screeching bird, one welcome sound reached Elka’s ears.

“It almost got me!”

It was Bahm’s voice. He hadn’t died. Unbelievable! Was this actually Bahm they were seeing or was it his spirit?

Bahm was making his way towards them through the trees. Yes it was Bahm in the flesh! The plan had strangely failed. Bahm explained how he had heard the tree trunk split and had dived behind a nearby stump. Two smaller trees, pushed by the big one, fell on either side of him. The tangled mess do not so much as scratch him. Believing he had been the near victim of an unavoidable accident, he asked them to be more careful next time.

The Wai Wai could not understand why they had failed. But it took no great reasoning to convince themselves that never again should they try to kill anyone with such a charmed life.

Soon after the airstrip was completed, all gathered to see the sky canoe bring the wives of Mistokin and Bahm, and Mistokin's three young children. The Wai Wai were intrigued by the women – their wavy hair, their clothes, and the way they cooked and kept house. The white women plunged into the work, helping their husbands in treating illnesses of the Wai Wai, and as soon as they had gained some knowledge of the language they helped with teaching. It was something of a shock when Mistokin said one day that he must leave to work elsewhere for God; he and his family would join Mlayla, (the third brother), who was already working in another part of the country.

Bahm and his wife, now alone with the Wai Wai, studied endless days with Elka, so that they might speak the Wai Wai language as if it were their own. Their goal was to write down the language on paper. Only when this was done, could the Wai Wai make God's paper talk back to them.

The old witchdoctor Muyuwa was very friendly towards the missionaries, because he was getting the tools and other items he wanted. He helped them pick out a permanent station-site, an hour's paddling downriver from Baking Plate. It was high ground, out of the reach of flood-waters. The soil was black and good for growing yams. It had once belonged to the now extinct Taruma tribe. Elka was glad they had chosen this spot. It was only a short distance upstream from the site of the village he was starting.

"What will you call your place," Elka asked Bahm.

"Kanashen," Bahm replied. "It means 'God loves you'."

Kanashen soon became more than just a place of homes built on 'legs'. Gradually people were attracted to Kanashen, which was becoming a centre of Wai Wai life. The mile-long path between Kanashan and Elka's village, Yaka Yaka, became well worn.

In the middle of the yard, Bahm planted a mango tree. Under its deep green foliage many important events were to take place throughout the years. In its shade, the Wai Wai were to learn 'to get ears for God's Paper'.

The people met for lessons about God every Sunday afternoon. Looking over the group gathered, Elka noticed that nearly everyone had come, even Yukuma. As Bahm talked, Elka found he was getting good ears. So were a few of his friends.

The Sunday's lesson also included a reading class. Most people were slow to learn, but Elka was always eager for another lesson with Bahm. He seemed able to learn where others stumbled and stopped in frustration. Elka was very familiar with the spirit world – a world full of evil demons – so it was not hard for him to believe that God was a spirit.

But how could a Wai Wai person believe that peace and love, rather than injury and vengeance, flowed from a spirit? Bahm tried to show Elka that while the devil was the prince of this world, God was stronger still and had power over the devil's wickedness, and had a plan for his final destruction. Elka knew the evil side of life. He could be won if he could see that Jesus Christ was the one good spirit, infinitely greater than any evil spirit.