

# From the Village to the Ends of the Earth

LIVING AND WORKING WITH  
A BIBLELESS PEOPLE  
TO BRING THEM THE WORD OF GOD

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# PREFACE

“He shall have dominion also from sea to sea,  
and from the River to the ends of the earth.”

PSALM 72:8

The work of discipling the nations sometimes means sending missionaries to the uttermost parts of the earth. And bringing God’s Word for the first time to an unreached people group is definitely a difficult task. But are missionaries superheroes doing superhuman things—or are they just normal Christians with an extraordinary God? When God calls His children to a hard task, He goes there with them and makes it all possible. But why go to a small village on the other side of the earth when there is so much work still to

be done in one's own country? God calls and equips some of His children to go to foreign places because all nations are His and He is spreading His kingdom to the ends of the earth. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, and His people go out in His service.

When God calls a family to live overseas in a village, it also means bringing their children along too. Stories of our family are scattered throughout this book on purpose, because family life is an integral part of the "real work." Raising our children for Christ means pouring into them daily, providing a family life that is both fun and filled with the grace and love of Christ in action. When children grow up to follow the Lord with their whole heart, they are a powerful witness for Christ.

God's kingdom work can be done wherever you are as you walk faithfully with Him, but in this book I focus on what it is like to translate the Bible into an unwritten language, from the start of learning it without any books, to later trying to find just the right words for key biblical concepts that are completely missing in the target language.

Language is also influenced by culture, so one must seek to understand how people view their world as well, and this can mean trying to make sense of a view that is entirely different from one's own. For example, what explanation is given when someone is sick for a prolonged period of time? What importance do dreams and bad thoughts have? What do people fear? All of

this helps us understand who they are, so to better know how to reach them for Christ.

At times, missionary life can take twists and turns that are unexpected. Sometimes God calls His people to really difficult things, like getting caught in civil wars. This book gives you an inside view of some challenging situations that missionaries have found themselves in, and how God came through. It shows the hardships and sacrifice that people must be willing to make when they take up a work like this. But it is all a part of the process and privilege of taking part in God's Kingdom work as it spreads from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth.

~Lisa Leidenfrost



# CHAPTER ONE

## ENTERING THE VILLAGE

“There’s the village!” the kids shouted. The sun was setting behind the giant tropical trees in the distance as we entered the sleepy village of Touadji II. It didn’t seem possible that we had been gone for an entire year from our home. Yet, it was still the same with its deeply rutted roads worn by the rains. While we drove in past the worn, wooden shops and rounded the corner, we could see the tin-roofed houses slipping into the shadows of the departing sun. Smoke from the kitchen fires wafted through the thatch of the cook houses as women prepared for the evening meal. It all seemed so peaceful and quiet, until our truck was spotted, and the place came to life.



Village women with babies on their backs set down their bundles and ran excitedly toward us. Men waved enthusiastically and joined the growing throng. Soon the fading light of the setting sun was totally blocked from our view as white smiling teeth set in dark, shining faces filled the windows. Bakwé children pushed through the adults and extended their little hands to clasp my children's as they greeted them with the typical Bakwé greeting of "Ayo." By now, other people were running up to the truck with exclamations of joy and pleasure in their efforts to welcome us heartily home. Adults, too, thrust their hands in the window to grasp ours in a Bakwé gesture of friendship to reestablish a relationship that had been interrupted for far too long.

After the excitement of greeting this initial group, we drove down the dirt road followed by our escort of village children running behind and came to another series of courtyards. These people ran out to greet us as well in successive waves. When the last group receded from our view, we turned into the dirt road that led to our house where we were met by a wiggling ball of pent up energy, who was barking his joy at our return. We drove around the house to the back, and Janvier, our cook, came running out of the kitchen and gave us an enthusiastic greeting. As the truck was unloaded, Janvier talked non-stop to my husband, Csaba<sup>1</sup>, in French. I went into the courtyard and was greeted by

1 Csaba is a Hungarian given name pronounced *Chaba*.

my mongoose whistling frantically at the sound of our voices. When I opened her cage and picked her up, she did her routine thing and wet all over my shirt with a nasty smelling liquid which was her unique way of saying “I missed you.”

Csaba by now had entered the kitchen with Janvier still talking a mile a minute. When I got in, I showed Janvier a can of sauce that he could add to a can of hotdogs for a quick meal. As Janvier resumed talking to Csaba about the year’s events, I slipped out into my garden. Everything was so beautiful! The flowers were in bloom and the grass had started to fill in nicely. I looked around and the emotions of being home filled me with warmth. It had been so long since I had last seen all this. I looked at our fruit trees and was pleased that they were heavily laden with oranges, so I gathered some and headed back into the house. I glanced into the pot that was rapidly boiling on the stove and noticed something funny about the sauce. I didn’t pay it too much mind since Janvier is a good, creative cook but still, I wondered.

About now Alexis and Perez, Csaba’s translation and literacy coworkers, came to greet us. As they talked in the kitchen, Janvier was setting the table with the sauce placed in the middle. Curious, I picked up the lid and yes, it still looked a bit odd, so I tasted it. Sure enough, my worst suspicions were confirmed. Janvier, in his excitement on seeing us, had opened a can of applesauce by mistake. It was garnished with

hotdogs floating in the middle. As I pointed this out, he groaned and said, “Oh, I was just so happy to see you that I wasn’t paying attention. I really don’t like it when you’re away, and there is so much to talk about.” (Applesauce with hotdogs wasn’t too bad, but I don’t recommend it.)

That night after unpacking a few items, we went to the courtyard of Alexis’ family and sat for a while shooting the breeze, Bakwé style. One of the wives chatted with me as we sat around a lantern on wooden stools enjoying the evening. It was a comfortable feeling, the feeling of belonging, of seeing familiar faces that care about you. It was the feeling of life going on with you a part of it.

In a strange way we belonged there, and even though we were very different from each other, we had a place in their lives and they in ours. We were home.

## **THE VILLAGE OF TOUADJI II**

We lived in a remote corner of the Ivory Coast about a two-hour drive from the coastal town of San Pédro. If you drove up this road, you would come to the village where we lived. It was not impressive or set apart in any way, except that it was the place we made our home. This village was full of Bakwé, a people who, before our arrival in 1989, had no written language and were largely without the knowledge of God’s grace and salvation. You could even say that they were an un-reached people group.

This Bakwé village, like the others, was full of mud and stick houses cracked by the sun's baking and worn with time. There was also an occasional concrete house scattered amongst the earthen ones. No matter how prosperous or how poor, the houses were all surrounded by a network of dirt paths that were the stomping grounds of goats, chickens, ducks, guinea fowl, pigs, and sheep which always seemed to be where you wished they were not. These roads were also filled with children playing, women going to market bearing heavy loads on their heads, men going off to their fields—by people, in general, living out their daily lives.

If you looked beyond all this, our house was in the farthest corner of the village on the edge between civilization and the wilds beyond. This wilderness kept encroaching upon us with its unwanted creatures that had a nasty habit of visiting us at night. We had cobras and driver ants drop in from time to time and even an elusive crocodile that decided to take up its residence in one of our murky ponds. Unlike the wilderness beyond our borders, our property was filled with flowers, fruit trees and carpeted with thick grass—a veritable Garden of Eden.

In this lush corner, on the edge of the village, Csaba translated the Bible with his team while I taught our four children, Hans, Noai (only daughter), Andreas, and Jeremiah. We didn't have many modern conveniences, but we were happy, with our dog, two cats, two mongooses, various chickens, several ducks, and

a sassy parrot. Here is a look into our lives and the process it takes to bring the Bible to a Bibleless people who have never had a written language before, and also what it is like for an American family to live in a place so very different from our own homeland. These are stories and sketches taken from different periods, that culminate in the end, with the rumblings of a civil war.

### **GOD HAS NOT FORGOTTEN US**

Upon first entering Bakwé land for an initial visit in 1989, Csaba did a survey to find out if there were any Christians amongst the Bakwé. He had spent days traveling with a fellow missionary, visiting villages and asking if there were any Bakwé who considered themselves Christians. Each time the answer he received was no. He then visited existing churches that were led by other ethnic peoples in the nearby towns, asking the same question and getting the same response. He wondered if there were any Christians at all amongst the Bakwé or were these people completely unreached for Christ?

After this survey trip, we moved as a family to the town of Soubré, situated on the fringe of Bakwé territory, where we rented a house from the Christian Missionary Alliance (CMA) mission. We had two children at the time, a two-year-old and a baby. From our rented home, Csaba went into Bakwé territory again and did a language survey, this time to determine which

village had the most central dialect to use for the translation and also which was the most prestigious of them all. This would be the one that all the different dialects could understand and would be recognized as the original Bakwé. After analyzing the results, he picked the village of Touadji II. When we got approval from the village elders and were given a piece of land, Csaba took daily trips to build our home. While in Soubré, we visited different local churches still trying to find out if there were any Bakwé believers.

During one of these Sunday visits, Csaba got up during the announcements and explained that we had come to translate God's Word into the Bakwé language and were there any Bakwé in the congregation? Before he finished speaking, two older Bakwé women shot up in joyful exuberance and started to dance in circles and sing. They were deeply moved and praised



God over and over in their song as they danced. Then the women stopped dancing and said, “God has heard our prayer. We have been praying for many years that He would send someone to the Bakwé. Now they have come. God has not forgotten the Bakwé!”

We were thrilled. We now found two evangelical believers out of ten thousand or more people and we were evidently an answer to their prayers! Later we visited another evangelical church in town to see if there were any more and found five Bakwé young men who had been evangelized at one of the church’s outreaches. Somehow these men happened to be in the right place at the right time, and God touched their hearts to grant them His salvation. Csaba began meeting with these young men and encouraged them to think about starting a branch of the church amongst their own people. They took up the suggestion and started one in the village of Galéa which was the very first Bakwé Protestant church that we knew of.

Soon the Bakwé started to come to that church and we worshiped with them to encourage them. Having a toddler and baby in tow came with its own challenges. The church met in a small mud and thatch meeting hall, where it became unbearably hot as people crowded into the tightly packed space. On top of that, no one ever knew how many hours the service would last. This was hard for very young children.

On one hot Sunday, partway into the sermon, one or both of my kids had gotten fussy and started to cry.

They were hot, miserable, and it wasn't to their liking, so I took them out of the service.

Once out in the blazing tropical sun, we were surrounded by a wall of curious onlookers who wanted to stare at the white people. I guess we were a rarity in those parts. To get away from the wall of onlookers and out of the air-stagnation zone, I took the kids to the truck that was now baked from the sun. We got inside and opened some windows to let in a little breeze which started to cool down the oven. But not for long, because the onlookers had caught up with us and were blocking all the windows. They evidently were not done with their show and we were the main attraction. On top of being surrounded by watchful eyes, the children were hungry and started to fuss some more, since it was now past noon.

I could still hear the preacher in the background thundering out his sermon and it didn't sound like he was about to end any time soon. I tried to keep the kids happy the best I could in the stifling heat with our wall of attentive onlookers. When the service finally ended, people wanted to greet Csaba and talk with him, which was really important in Africa. By the time he arrived back at the truck and saw the state of the children, he realized something needed to change. So we had to get creative to make it work for the kids. I forget exactly how we did it, and it was never easy, but we managed somehow with snacks and fans and things to do. We then went back Sunday after Sunday to encourage



the young fledgling church. And, thankfully, after a while, when the kids and I routinely left the service, our throng of viewers got less and less as they became more accustomed to us. But, I noticed, we were never left entirely alone.

### **THE PROPHET HARRIS**

Csaba researched the history of our area and found that there were numerous Harrist churches already in the Bakwé territory. These were independent African churches and had been influenced by William Wadé Harris (often referred to as the Prophet Harris).

In 1913, William Wadé Harris came walking barefoot along the coast from Liberia into Ivory Coast. He wore a long, white robe that had black sashes crisscrossed around his chest and he held a staff in his hand. He went from village to village allegedly doing miracles and telling people to burn their fetishes and turn to God. Many people did. He taught the ten commandments, and had his followers worship on Sunday. Aside from teaching them songs using their own style of music, Harris also told them to wait for the white man who would bring them the Bible. He said that if a man came who did not have the Bible, he was a lying man and they were not to listen to him. He also said that one day the white man and the black man would sit down at the same table to eat together. People considered this last saying a prophecy. Because of the Prophet Harris, many regions were ripe for missionaries who

came after him. Not long after there were many established protestant churches of different denominations in other language groups. Not only that, but an indigenuous church called the Harrist Church also took root along large portions of the Ivory Coast.

As the legend goes, when the prophet came to our general region, the people rejected him, so he put a curse on the whole area and said that they would be overlooked by development. This proved to be true. But in the 1960s the Bakwé finally turned and joined the Harrist religion, setting up churches in every village and installing Harrist priests. Yet in most cases the priests did not know how to read, and the Bible in the French language remained a closed book. The concepts of grace and the gospel were little understood because there was no Bible in their language and they had limited access to those who could teach them.

The Harrists in our area did not consider themselves connected with the Protestant churches in any way and shunned them; hence when we asked if there were any Christians, they assumed we meant only Protestants. They would say that they were “Harrist” and not “Protestant.” They had a basic belief in God but had an incomplete understanding of the Scriptures. The Harrist churches at that time had their own forms and rituals mixed in with some of their pagan beliefs and their lives were little changed after becoming Harrist. Yet when the church bell tolled at four o’clock a.m. people would file into the church to sing and chant as part of

their daily ritual. That was what we found when we entered Bakwé land in 1989. Our goal was to get the scriptures into their hands so that they could have a full knowledge of the gospel and why Jesus came to this earth to die for us.

### **GETTING AROUND IN TOWN**

Getting around town and doing the shopping was always an interesting experience. Shopping was usually not a simple matter of walking into a store and paying the price listed on the tag, since one had to play the market game first.

On one such day when Csaba was in town, a stranger called out from inside a booth laden with goods, “Hey mustache! My friend. I haven’t seen you in a long, long while. Where have you been? I’ve got a good price for you today since you are my very good friend. Come and take a look.”

Csaba bent over and picked up an item. His supposed good friend said, “I will give you this item real cheap, especially for you. Normally the price is much higher but since you have come to see me, it is only 2,000 cfa.”<sup>2</sup> Csaba responded casually, “But a friend of mine bought one at another booth for much less.” The vendor shrugged this new bit of information off and responded, “No, 2,000 cfa is a good price and my quality

<sup>2</sup> 2,000 cfa is roughly \$4.00.

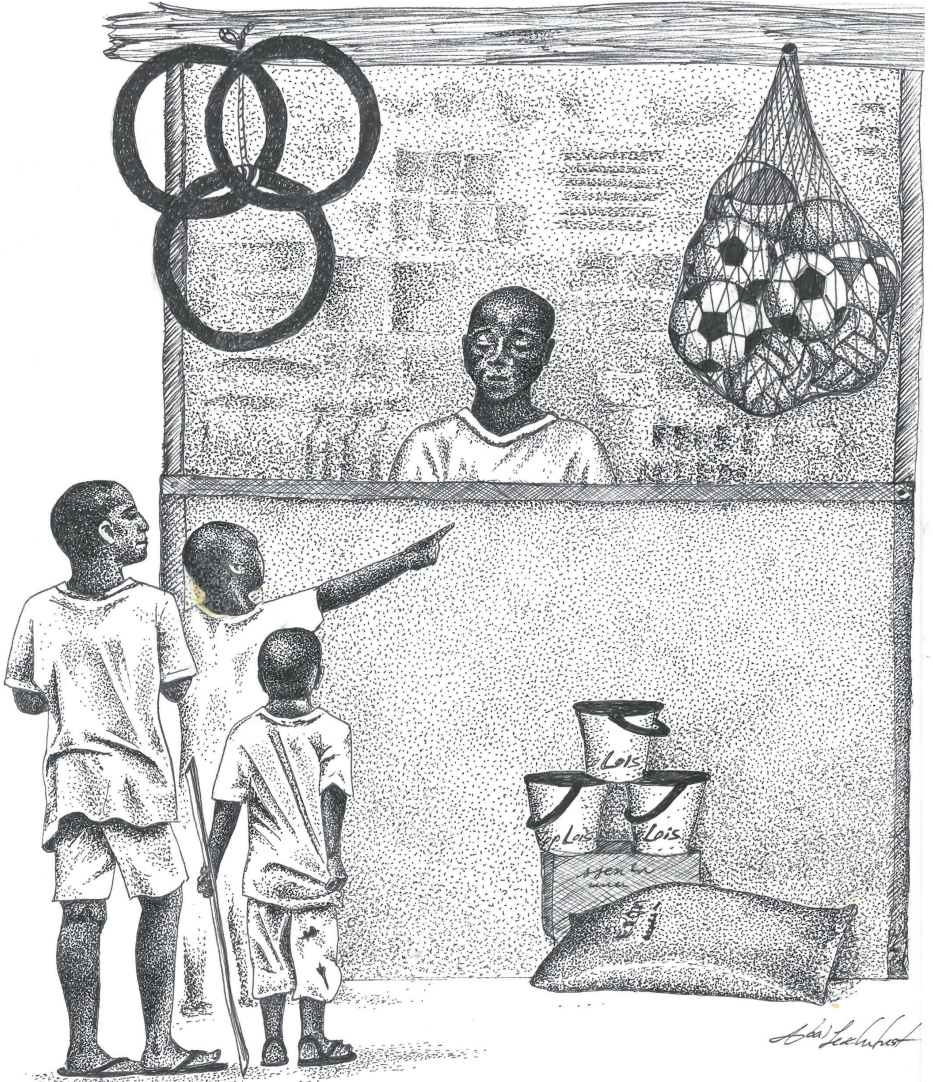
is better. You will not find quality like this. I have this special price only for you.”

A very long and drawn-out conversation ensued bartering the price down. Eventually the final cost was decided upon, but not before Csaba’s “friend” had given him the runaround with the price. That is just part of the market game.

The vendors in booths can be hard enough to deal with, but the top of my list for hassling were the walking street vendors, who were a very tenacious group of passionate sellers. You didn’t have to try and find them: they found you. They spoke a different language and a “No, thank you,” in their vendor mind meant “Yes, I want that very much, thank you, but I’m playing hard to get.” Even after a hard and firm no, they could still be very difficult to shake off, even following you down the street.

One day while in town, I was latched onto by a street vendor carrying a variety of watches and he was very determined to sell me a bunch of them. I never even spoke much, but only gave a polite nod and a “No, thank you” to discourage him. He didn’t take the hint and proceeded to tell me why I needed another watch or two or three. When I didn’t exactly specify how many watches I wanted after his appeal, he started shoving a few in my arms. I responded by shoving them back, but he wouldn’t take them! This little routine kept up for several more blocks with me still carrying his watches! I

was finally able to give them all back after I somehow convinced his vendor brain that I really did not need or want his wares. He then left to go harass another victim. After he was gone and peace ensued, I asked Csaba what I had done wrong. He simply



## CHAPTER TWO

### SCHOOL

While Csaba analyzed the language, I kept up with our children and the house which was a full-time job that I wanted to do well. On the side I learned as much of the language as I could through a tutor. Then, over the next several years, my job increased when we added two more children to our family to equal four. While still trying to keep up with some language learning myself, I spent most of my time running the house and schooling the kids, which was a challenge living where we did. It was fun to teach children who wanted to learn, especially if those children were your own. But I still welcomed help, and it came to us one day out of the blue.



We were told that Susan, a new schoolteacher, had some extra time before going up to teach the Saunders children, whose parents, Philip and Heather, were doing translation work just north of us. We were happy to have her come to our village and teach for a couple weeks, since teachers showing up to help were few and far between.

She was young and wanted to get in a little overseas teaching experience before she started her own career as a teacher. Through correspondence, we found out that she did not like creepy crawlies too well. (We all have our faults.) Unfortunately, we had lots of what she didn't like in our house and all over our property. But to be good hosts, we decided to rid the place of creepy crawlies the best we could. I was pleased with the success of our first eradication efforts. I thought she would be too, but her initial reaction proved otherwise.

Since all of our bedrooms were occupied by kids at the time, we sectioned off a room for her in the dining area by hanging a large mat from the ceiling. We placed a bed and table in it with a kerosene lamp. I thought it quite nice.

When I showed her the room, I mentioned proudly, "We just killed a family of rats in the mat ceiling above your space. I think they're all dead now. We fed them to the cats. Oh, by the way, there still are quite a few mice, but we consider them permanent residents. Don't let them bother you. They stay pretty much in the thatch until night."

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **THE LITERACY WORKSHOP**

After Csaba was able to reduce the Bakwé language to writing, he began thinking about doing literacy, which was an important step for people to read the Bible when it was completed. He now had a team of three people, Alexis, Perez and Firmain. The first step was for the team to develop primers to teach people how to read and write in Bakwé. After that, they would start up classes. Once the people learned to read, they then needed material to read. Since the language had just been written down, there weren't any booklets available yet. Over time the team would be making booklets on topics that included health, folk tales, short stories and Bible background. In the meantime, to get ready



for making the first primer, the team gathered stories of folk tales to get texts to work with. In one of them it explains why the lizard bobs its head, with the moral of the story being that gossip can get you in trouble.

After they got their material, Csaba signed up for a literacy workshop in Bouaké where our other center was located. This was the place where he would be attending workshops over the years on how to tackle different aspects of the translation.

On the day that we were to go, we piled our luggage in the truck along with our mongoose and bird in their respective cages. We had hardly enough room for ourselves let alone the cages, but these pets didn't like to be left behind, so they had to come.

Since the mongoose had a musky smell that was so unique to her species, the cage was put in the back of the truck along with the luggage. But not

