

My story

Delayed answers

This account of the trials of a converted animist in Burkina Faso (formerly Upper Volta) is related by Brian Woodford, a former missionary with WEC International. It is a good example of the many ways in which God's people are tested, but reveals that God brings fruit from it all in the end.

One morning in 1939 a fair-haired Irish missionary named Charles Benington drove in his Model A Ford into a remote tribal village in Upper Volta. Malba was one of the villages of the Birifor tribe, which numbered about 40,000 people, most of whom were under the control of a chief named Bompitay. Benington went to this chief to ask if he would gather the people that evening so that he could address them.

A crowd of men assembled that evening and listened to the story of the Creator God who made the heavens and the earth and called on people to worship him alone. Benington spoke the language of the neighbouring Lobi tribe, but most Birifors understood this, so when he made an appeal for anyone who was prepared to put his faith in the Living God, two brothers stood up. One was a man called Samba, one of the chief's henchmen and his head drummer. Samba took Benington back with him to his house to talk into the night and, there under the stars, Samba prayed to this Living God whose name was Jesus. Benington wrote in his diary the next morning that when Samba prayed on that flat mud roof it was so real that it was as if he could hear the angels singing up in heaven.

After Benington left, the chief called in the two men and congratulated them for 'putting on a good show for the white man' and told them to forget all about it. Samba's brother had kept his idols hidden in his shoulder bag, so he turned back to them without hesitation, but Samba refused. He had already destroyed all his idols.

Consequently Samba fell out of favour with the chief and lost his job. He

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had two wives, but the difficulties that came from his faith resulted in one dying and the other running away, so he was left to bring up his small daughter alone. The chief even tried to starve him to death. No one would help him cultivate, or give him any food. One time Samba was tied up and left to die on an anthill, but his little girl found him and cut the ropes. But when she was old enough the chief took her as a wife (he had dozens already), and eventually a little boy was born to them.

Samba waited for someone to come and teach him more, but no one came. A few times Benington came back and prayed with him and each time, after he had gone, the chief had Samba beaten. After waiting over four years Samba began to pray that God would send a teacher so he could learn how to share his faith with his own people. He only knew that there was a Living God who created the world and that his name was Jesus, and therefore he could have no other gods or idols. When he died he knew he would go to God's country, and his ambition was to sit on a stool next to Benington.

When I was ten I was confined to bed with mumps. My mother bought me Joyce Reason's children's book of the life of David Livingstone. I read it through and was fascinated by the pictures of Livingstone being attacked by a lion and setting slaves free from the Arab slave traders. I prayed, 'O God, I would like to be a missionary in Africa like David Livingstone.' Immediately a reply came into my head. 'All right, then you shall be.' It was a silent voice but very specific. Words I have never forgotten.

Years later, while at the WEC Missionary Training College in Glasgow I listened to a missionary home from Upper Volta tell about a man who lived alone, the only believer in his tribe, who had been waiting for years for someone to come and tell him more. I knew that was my call. I arrived in 1960 and discovered Samba, still waiting. He lived alone in a mud house that had so fallen down he had not even room to stretch out his sleep mat. Snakes and rats shared the mud ruin.

When I learnt enough of the language to talk with him Samba shared his story. I counted back and figured that the year Samba first prayed for God to send a missionary was the very year I was in bed with mumps and heard God's voice. But it took sixteen years for Samba to see the answer to his prayer. He had not stopped praying, or trusting in this invisible God. Samba

was a true Abraham, standing firm on the little bit of revelation he had received, knowing there was more to discover.

I went to visit the old chief, Bompitay, surrounded by his idols (and his fifty wives and two hundred children). I asked permission to come and live in his village and tell the people about Jesus who was the Living Creator God, but he refused. He had enough gods, he told me, and he didn't want Jesus. So I had to leave, and pray that God would open the door. Four months later the chief fell out with the French colonial authorities and a pitched battle ensued. All the wives and children were scattered (including Samba's daughter and grandson), while Bompitay escaped on a bicycle to Ghana and never came back.

So the way opened and I found a three-roomed mud house with a tin roof and moved in, with Samba. We eventually rediscovered his two year old grandson, and he came to live with us. This was my life from 1960 to 1971. A church was planted, the Birifor language reduced to written form, and leaders trained. I eventually went back to complete the translation of the New Testament, and the church now thrives under Birifor leadership with no missionary presence. Samba went home to glory in 1970. Daniel, his grandson, is a pastor and has been Principal of the Hebron Pastoral Institute in Ivory Coast. At the time of writing he is in the last stages of presenting his PhD dissertation (in French) on the training of church leadership in the African context.