1. Ua comes back

Four of the children of the Mawe were playing in a backwater, racing boats. They were not paddling boats themselves across the little corner of the great river, but raced toy boats, which they had made out of seedpods and gum from the aca tree and pieces of bark. There were two girls, Caupé and Biri, and two boys, Iri and Ulua, but they were of an age when they still looked much the same as one another. Though the Mawe did not count how old they were in those days, they were all about eleven years old. Biri was tall and slim, and Ulua was tall and slim with a long head. Caupé had thick black hair, and thick short legs for one of the Mawe, but Iri was the shortest of all, and could make his face look like the face of a toad. Sometimes he did this on purpose, to make his friends laugh, and sometimes he did this by mistake, and then he got angry when they did laugh. On the inside, Iri was not much like a toad at all. He was much more like a falcon, who flies high above the world and sees all, and does not fear even things he ought to fear. And though she was so tall and long-legged, Biri was in spirit like the big round bird called the murum turkey, who builds its nest in a great mound and does not like to go far from it. Caupé was like a jaguar, who is fierce and cunning, but does no more work than it must, and Urua was like the broad-headed alligator that is called a caiman- slow to move, slow to take insult, slow to change, but also slow to leave off doing anything once he has started doing it

It had been Iri's idea to make boats and race them on the backwater. He must have practiced making them by himself in secret, Caupé said, for his boat was always the quickest. It caught what little breeze there was beneath the green roof of the forest, and while the other boats hugged the shore where the children stood, Iri's would flit across to the other side. It did not like fly an arrow to a bird, for that would be magic, but more like a bird might fly to another bird, pretending he was not so eager to join it. By the shores of the backwater it was hot and still, but the shadows of the great-boled trees kept off the glare of the sun, and it was easy enough for the children to leap into the water to cool themselves. Often enough they had to jump in, to fetch the boats back from where they had wandered. The quiet backwater was the kind of place where caimans lived, but they were not afraid to swim there. They knew how to spot the signs of caimans near, and what to do should one come near, as well as children their age in Capa-Zulare know how to avoid traffic on the streets.

"Ai! Yours is again the fastest," said Ulua. "I do not know what I am doing wrong." He watched his boat gyring unsteadily on the dark clear water, no more than a body's length away from where he stood.

"It is always the same," grumbled Biri, splashing her feet in the water. "Iri comes up with some new trick, and wants to show off, so we must do the same thing as he."

"What does it matter?" said Caupe. She made a kind of wave with her hands that was a way of saying, one thing will happen, and another, but it is better to be friends than enemies. "I think I know how he has made it to catch the wind, and I can build mine to do the same." She was still for a moment, and watched Iri's boat go into the reeds at the other side of the backwater. "I can show you too, if you like."

"I have had enough of boats today," said Biri. "And so have I," said Ulua. "But I will let you show me later, Caupe."

"Ha!" said Iri. "I know how to make mine faster, also, and tomorrow it will still be first across the water, whatever you do." He made a sign like an arrow flying through the air, and tried to look fierce. Caupe only laughed at him, and then leapt into the water. It was deeper than she was high, and after she had ducked her head she swam in one place a little way from

the bank, turning around to look back at the others. “Are you going to fish your boat out, Iri, or are you going to stay here until the stars come out, practicing to go faster?”

Iri scowled hard, and his face was set like a toad, but there was no anger in his eyes. Then he plunged into the river and swam underwater to the other side, where his boat was lodged somewhere among the reeds and the roots of the great trees Caupe swam more slowly over to where her boat bobbed and picked it up. Biri’s was near, and she grabbed it as well. “They are too light, I think,” she said, and threw Biri’s up to her, then scrambled up the bank on all fours like a capybara. “I will find a straighter seed pod, and I will put heron feathers on it to catch the wind,” she said, turning her boat this way and that in her hands.

“And so will I,” said Ulua. He lay face down on a log that reached out a little way over the water and stretched down to try and catch hold of his boat, which was very close to the bank. “I do not know if it will work, but I will try it.” Catching his boat was more difficult than he had thought, and in the end he gave up and jumped into the water.

In the meantime Iri was hunting through the reeds for his boat, thrashing about in a careless way like a young tapir. “Ai! It is lost!” he said. “I do not see how, but it has just been swallowed up by the reeds.”

“I will show you how to make another,” called Caupé. “You will get covered in leeches, wandering about in those reeds.”

Iri only grunted, as though to say he needed no help from Caupé, and that he cared nothing for leeches.

“Yes, you can make another boat,” said Biri, standing up. She brushed away little bits of rotten leaf that had stuck to her legs when she had been sitting down. “Leave it, Iri, let us go.” She checked Caupé’s own back for leeches, but did not see any. The two girls stood side by side, peering across the water at Iri’s flailing, and tried to catch sight of anything in the reeds he might have missed.

“I can help look for it,” called Ulua, setting his own boat on the bank.

“No, it does not matter,” said Iri. He smiled back at the others from the edge of the reeds and threw his arms in the air as if to say that he did not care, then began to swim more slowly back, leaving his boat to its fate. “It is the greatest part of the fun, building the boat. Even you had fun building your boat, Biri.”

“For a while it was fun,” said Biri. “But not all day. We have been here for ages, and I am hungry.”

“Do not complain so,” said Iri. “We are hungry too. But it is better here than hanging around the village, where nothing ever happens.”

Ulua climbed carefully out of the water, so slowly that he came out only a little before Iri, and they checked each other’s backs for leeches. Then the four children started back for the village of the Mawe, where there was food to be had, and grown-up people to tell them what to do, and nothing ever happened. The waters had only gone down a little while ago, and the old floodplain was thick with silt and bits of rotted leaves, and tumbled with the great logs of trees that had fallen long ago. They went over these or under them, as was easiest. They went through a narrow place where there were tall stands of bamboo on either side, and then climbed up a slippery track to the top of an earthen ridge. Here less grew at ground level, and they could walk swiftly along a carpet of leaves toward the village of the Mawe. Someone not born in that forest could easily have been lost, even on the short walk to the village; but

Caupe and the others knew the look of every tree, and could no more lose themselves than a child nowadays would get lost in their own house.

As they came to the edge of the village, they saw a man walking up another track from the south, where the great river was. He walked with long determined strides, looking neither to the right or to the left, and carrying something like a monkey over his shoulder.

“It is Ua,” said Ulua. “He has come back!” He smiled and hopped into the air, for Ua was his brother, and he had been gone for a long time. Though there were many years between them, and they did not speak to one another much, Ulua had always loved his brother.

“Ah, that is good for you,” said Caupé. “He has been lucky again.”

“He has come back too many times not to come back,” said Iri.

“That makes no sense,” said Caupé.

“He has come back so many times that it is a wonder he should come back at all,” said Biri.

“A man cannot be lucky forever,” said Caupé.

When Ua was a boy, not much older than they were, he had loved a girl called Guma, and she was clever and cheerful and beautiful, and she loved him, but one day she was taken by a jaguar. After that, the boy Ua did not smile again. His sadness made him strange, and always afterwards he would hunt alone, seeking the jaguar and the puma and the stinking beasts of the deep forest in places farther and farther away. After many years had gone by the rest of the Mawe forgot the sadness that had made him strange and remembered only his strangeness, and made fun of him. They did not do this to his face, for he had grown into a tall and fierce man, and become strong and cunning by his hunting alone in distant places, and he had a bad temper.

Sometimes Ua would be gone so long in distant parts of the forest that the Mawe began to think he would never return, and said to one another: ‘Strange Ua has gone off alone too many times, and now he is lost. A jaguar has taken him, or a puma, or a hunting band of the Taraui.’ And the men would look grim and shake their fists in the air as though they held bows, for the Taraui had been the enemies of the Mawe since the moon first appeared in the sky, and once or twice in every year would come down the river in their long black canoes with barbed arrows for hunting men, to do what mischief they could. But whenever the men of the Mawe had decided that Ua was lost forever, the next day or the day after he would come back, a little stronger and fiercer.

Ua walked more quickly than the children, and would have been lost to sight ahead of them, but Iri called out, “Come, let us go welcome him,” and they ran up to where he was. As they got closer, they saw that the thing he had slung over his shoulder was very strange indeed.

“That is a strange monkey,” said Ulua. “Or is it a bird?”

They came up to Ua on the edge of the clearing where the village stood, where the sun broke through, and he stopped when they called out to him. ‘Greetings, Brother Ua,” said Ulua. “Greetings, uncle Ua,” said the others. “Have you had good hunting?”

Ua scowled in the way people made fun of when he was not there, but he looked fiercer and stronger than the children remembered, and there were new scars on his arms and legs, and he did not answer their question. He looked as though he had been wandering by himself for so long that he had half forgotten the skill of speaking, and their words took a long time for him to hear.

They all stared at the thing slung upside-down over his back, which was like no creature they had ever seen before. It was about the size of a five-year-old child, and its feet were like the feet of an agouti, but it had hands like a little girl. It seemed to have three faces on three sides of its head, but none were much like the face of a man. It had both arms and wings, like no beast they had seen before, and its wings had no feathers. Neither did it have hair anywhere that they could see. Its skin was smooth and shone like water in the sunlight, and was as yellow as a turucuru bird. Iri could not help himself and reached out to touch it.

"What is it?" asked Iri, after Ua had swatted his hand away.

"It is a new kind of beast," growled Ua at last. "I found it in the hills where the forest ends, far away."

"Is it good to eat?" asked Ulua.

"You will not eat it," Ua said to his brother, and his voice was like the growl of the beasts he hunted in the forest. "I took it from a jaguar, which would have eaten it, and my hand was blooded because of it, and it is mine." He went to the men's house then, taking the new beast with him.

"I don't think it can be good to eat," said Caupé. "It has skin like a poison frog, and not like a bird or an armadillo. Its flesh is probably poison."

"You should not have touched it," said Ulua glumly. "You might be poisoned."

"Ua touched it," said Iri. "And he did not die. I will not die either." And he shook his fist in the air like he was a great warrior who the Taraui were afraid of, and held a great bow of dark wood that could shoot arrows right through their chests and out the other side.

"I do not think that thing can be a beast at all," said Iri. "Ua does not know what he has. That is not a beast, but some kind of spirit-man."

"What do you know of spirit-men?" scoffed Caupé, which was true enough, but they all half-wished and half-dreaded that what Iri said was true. They shuddered as if a thunderstorm was coming down the river, blowing a chill wind before it. Certainly the thing Ua had brought did not look like Erumi, the oppossum spirit-man, or like I-Juape, the jaguar spirit man, or the dark spirit man Curu-Piru who lurks wherever two paths cross, nor like any of the spirit-men like birds that speak with the voices of the dead, but there were more spirit-men about than are told of in tales, as every child of the Mawe knew.

"When I am a man, I will go off like Ua, and find strange spirit-men where the forest ends," said Iri, looking after Ua admiringly.

"And you will be thought strange like Ua, and have no one to comb your hair," said Biri. "I did not like that thing."

"It did not look dangerous," said Caupé. "What did its skin feel like, Iri?"

"Not like a frog," said Iri. "More like a leaf, than anything."

"I wonder what will happen now," said Ulua.

"Wonderful things," said Iri.

"Strange things, anyway," said Caupé. "If Ua has brought a spirit-man into the village, then everything will change."

And both Iri and Caupé were right, even though the art of seeing days that have not yet been had been lost long ago, when the pagé Bararai went away on the great water of the Tapajós, many years before the oldest of the old men of the Mawe were born.

These things happened on the day Sivan 16, in the 2305th year of creation. But the Mawe had no reckoning of years. They knew that they were older than the moon, and had been led to where they were now from the Grandfather Country by the brothers Ai-Cau and and Ai-Li, the monkey man and the snake man, but none of them could tell you how many generations of men had lived from then until now, or tell you who begot who, for they forgot the names of those who went before them as swiftly as they forgot their misfortunes.

This Iri is the same one who was afterwards a great friend of the King, and wore a cloak of a thousand scarlet feathers, and let no man forget how had been the first to say that the King's Jester was a spirit-man, and not a beast. He lies sleeping now in the great mound above Capa-Zulare, beside his sons and granddaughters, and the King is still the King. And this is the same Biri who was the first mistress of the wordhunters, and the first to think of a way to make the words the Mawe spoke into solid things, so that they could be taken out and repeated again and again. It was this Ulua who was the Ulua who travelled with the King to the lands of the Ge and the lands beyond, and was at his side when the treaty was made. It is Ulua who lived to be eighty-nine years old, and knew more of the law than any living man, so that from where the sun comes up to where it rises, men would journey to hear his wisdom. And Caupé, well, everyone knows who Caupé is. So these were no ordinary children playing with boats in a backwater on the day Ua came back with the Jester.

2. The Kua Man

The village of the Mawe sat atop a ridge where the edge of the river once had been, a place that the floodwaters lapped but did not cover when the river was high. To the east and west on the ridge were scattered plots of beans and fruiting trees, while north and south the land fell away into swamp and bamboo and igapó forest, where here and there the Mawe had cut out plots to grow manioc and gourds. Further to the north, a half day's walk away, could be seen the forested bluffs that were the edge of the solid lands, where the floodwaters never came, and the tapir and the stinking beasts and the strange men called the Macu lived. Most of the Mawe lived in the great house, which was covered in palm fibre thatch and held up by great beams of dark wood. The sleeping places of many families were in the great house, separated by curtains, but the smallest children and the monkeys and parrots that the Mawe had for pets wandered freely from one place to another. The great house was long, and high, and dark, and smoky, and had been made a generation ago, when the last great house had been burned by the Taraui. The unmarried men of the village lived in the men's house, and the unmarried women in the women's house. These were smaller and were built anew every year, one to the east and one to the west of the great house.

As the sun set on the day Ua came back, Iri and Ulua snuck up to the edge of the men's house to see if they could have another look at the thing that Ua had brought back, whether beast or spirit man. This was forbidden, since they were still children, but Iri did not care, and Ulua was persuaded that he should not care. Caupé could not be persuaded, for she would certainly have been beaten if she had been caught looking into the men's house, and they did not try to persuade Biri. It was the time of day that the cries of the serupuru were loudest, and Iri thought this would mask the sounds they made in their spying.

Iri was first, and put his head between two pieces of matting, taking care not to be seen. For a moment he could see nothing, for it was dim within the men's house as the sun set. As his eyes grew used to the dimness he found he had picked a good place to peer through, for there was his brother Auri lying in his hammock, dreaming of new things, and only a few feet further on was Ua, sitting on a mat and mending his arrows. Then he saw the thing Ua had

brought, looking grey rather than yellow in the dark. It lay on its side behind Ua, as limp as a dead thing, and one of its faces looked toward the edge of the house where Iri was. Its little hands looked sad, Iri thought, so much like the hands of a little girl, though the rest of it was so strange and so little like a man. Ulua worked his head through as well, and joined Iri in looking at the thing.

Then the golden creature opened its eyes, and they were green like the eyes of a caiman. Iri and Ulua had never seen such eyes, or heard of them, not in a hundred nights of tales. It looked them in the face, first Iri and then Ulua, as though it was trying to tell them something. Then it opened his mouths, and it spoke words without meaning, words that were music. Iri and Ulua had never heard such words, not in a thousand nights of songs. They sure then that it was no kind of beast, but a spirit-man or some other kind of man, for the things that it had sung were words. Ua heard the creature speaking, and then he saw Iri and Ulua spying on him, and jumped up to shoo them away.

"Do not eat the spirit man!" Iri called out, as Ulua pulled at him to flee. "Do not kill it!" Ua growled something back at Iri, but Iri could not tell what he said, for his words seemed to have less meaning than the words of the spirit man had.

Ua did not kill the thing he had found, and neither did he keep it tied up in the men's house. The next morning Caupé was the first of the children to see the spirit man walking about the village, hopping a little like a bird because of a lameness in his foot. He looked at Caupé with his green eyes, that were green like a caiman's eyes, that were green like the stones from distant lands that the Mawe did not know of in that time, and she loved him as Iri and Ulua had loved him.

"Greetings, spirit-man," she said, and the spirit-man said something back to her in words without meaning that were music, so she could not help but smile. She said 'greetings' again to the spirit-man, in the words of the Acau, for her mother had been traded from the Acau down the river to marry into the Mawe, and she knew a few words of theirs. But the spirit-man did not make any of their words either.

"You are happy because we are not going to eat you?" asked Caupé. "I would be happy, too."

The elders of the village did not gather together to decide that the creature might stay among the Mawe, but all men let him stay without it having to be decided. Each one of the Mawe who met it looked into its eyes, and listened to its speech, and then they knew he was no beast or enemy to be eaten or killed, but a kind of a man or a spirit man who wished them well. They did not call him the Jester then, as they would in later days, for that word had not yet been spoken. Instead he came to be called the kua man, after the kua bird, which was the same colour as he was. His skin had grown yet more golden with the passing days, and shone brighter and brighter in the sun, like the feathers of a hummingbird, or of the kua bird, which lives in the bamboo and has such a pleasant song. He never ate, but it seemed that he would stand in the rain and drink the rain. He would also stand for long hours in the sunlight with his wings outspread, in silence or in song. He never flew, so the children guessed that he was hurt in some way so that he could not fly, or else that his wings were only decoration, like a man's hair. Ua taught the kua man how to paint himself red and black, like a man, and wear a ring of kingfisher feathers around his head. But the kua man would only do this during the morning an evening, never when the sun was at its height.

It seemed to Iri that in those very first days two of the kua man's faces faded, so that they were easy not to see, and he kept two of his mouths always closed. At the same time his third face became more and more like the face of a man, until he could smile or frown like a man. At first Ua was jealous of the spirit-man he had found, and would not let others approach him

when he came near, but he grew softer in his manner, and he let Iri and Biri and Ulua and Caupé help him build a little house for the kua man. They built it in a place on the edge of the village where jaguars and venomous snakes never came, because a pagé from Ua's grandmother's time had put a spirit stone there.

Carume, who was a quiet woman who had never been seen about with any man of the Mawe, liked to listen to the voice of the kua man, and spent much time with Ua because of this. In a few changings of the moon Ua began to love the woman Carume, and then married her, and did not go off by himself into the forest anymore. From time to time he would even smile, now that he had someone to comb his hair, and he clapped Ulua on the back when he saw him and called him brother. Ua became fond of the kua man, and so did many other of the Mawe. Auri watched the cleverness of the Jester with his hands and taught him to weave feathers together. Caupé's father Ibai tried to teach him to climb trees to rob bird's nests. The women who sat together to weave baskets let the kua man watch, and he seemed to have nimble fingers at making baskets.

There was only one man among the Mawe did not love the kua man, and this was Yilaue. This Yilaue had been a brave warrior, who had killed many of the Taraui at the time when they came near to slaying all of the Mawe, before any of the children were born. He had no wife, and one clouded eye, and wore black feathers from the mutum bird in his hair. His grandmother was the pagé who set the stone at the place where the house of the kua man was built, and though Yilaue could not tell portents from the fall of leaves in the wind, or from the guts of fish, he thought himself still as one of the great pagé of old, and hated that the kua man should be set up in his grandmother's place. Yilaue did nothing to hurt the kua man, only mocked him and spoke against him sometimes, when with the other old men of the village he would squat smoking before the door of the men's house and slowly talk over all things under the sky that it is men's business to speak of. Yilaue had the name of a bird, as the kua man had, for yilaue was the name of a little brown bird with white bands over its eyes that is found only on the water's edge.

It was two changings of the moon after Ua had come back with the spirit man, and Caupé and Ulua and Iri sat together by the backwater where they had raced boats. The water was lower and blacker, and had more signs of caimans about it. Even though the village of the Mawe was near to five hundred miles from the sea, the waters still rose and fell with the distant tides. Biri had been taken away by her aunts, and was not there, and without her there seemed little point in racing boats.

"She is getting too old," grumbled Caupé. 'They will take her away soon to the women's house, and make her do grown-up things."

Ulua nodded. "You will be next, Caupé, and you will have to grate manioc all day, and then they will come for us. We will all change, and will not be friends anymore." Caupé made a sour face, and nodded.

"Now you sound like old men," said Iri. "Why grumble? We do not have to stop being friends. And when we are older will be able to go out and do more things than we can now, even go to the edge of the forest where Ua found the kua man."

"You know that is not true," said Caupé. "Grown men and women do not go about being friends. Nobody does such things, not even Ua, now that he has Carume to comb his hair. As for going to the edge of the forest, you know very well we would probably never return, if we tried it."

"He!" scoffed Iri. "Ua came back, and there is only one of him."

“Remember that even if you or I go out like Ua,” said Ulua, without meaning to mock. “Caupé will have to stay behind and tend the fields, for she is going to be a woman.”

“I do not want to talk about such things,” said Caupé, getting up from the log where she sat. “Let’s go find the kua man, and see what he is doing.”

“A good idea!” said Iri, and he leapt up as though someone had poked him with a stick.

3. Circles and Shells

The three children found the kua man squatting outside his house in a patch of full sunlight, drawing in the dirt with a curved twig. When he saw them, he lifted up the one face that he used and opened his green eyes shot through with flecks of gold. He sang them a few words of greeting in a voice like a bird’s.

“Greetings, kua man,” said Caupé. “I am sorry that my father made you rob bird’s nests for him. He never does any work himself, if he can help it.”

“What are you doing, kua man?” asked Iri. For answer, he made a kind of a smile with his mouth- which had no tongue or teeth, and smelled of burning water lilies when it opened- and then a sweeping motion with its wing across the dirt in front of him. He drew a small circle with his stick, and looked up again.

“A turtle egg,” said Iri. “The sun,” said Caupé. The kua man flapped his wings and drew a second circle beneath the first, exactly the same.

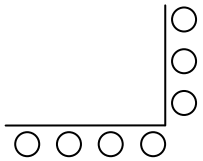
“Two eggs,” said Iri. “Two suns,” said Caupé, and laughed. The kua man drew a third circle, and then a straight line to the left of the three circles.

“Three eggs and a digging stick,” said Iri. Caupé shrugged, and Ulua picked up a stick of his own and drew a circle on the other side of the line. “The kua man draws them so well,” he said. “Mine looks more like a turtle egg that has already hatched- ai! He has rubbed it out.”

The kua man had rubbed out Ulua’s drawing, smiling all the time. He drew another line from right to left, straight out from the bottom of the first line.

“What is he doing?” said Ulua, puzzled.

“I think it is going to be a board for some kind of game,” said Caupé. “You could put stones in the circles, and have to move them to different places, depending on how long a twig you pulled out.” As she spoke the kua man drew another line of circles underneath the second line.



“There is a circle for each of us now on the kua man’s side,” said Ulua. “I think you must be right, Caupé, it is a game. I wonder how you play?”

“I don’t know,” said Iri. “I don’t know.”

The kua man drew one more line, joining the free ends of the other two lines, to make a triangle. Then he drew more circles along this last line, so that it had a full row of circles like the others.

“It is a very fine drawing,” said Caupé. “Yes, you have drawn well, kua man.”

The kua man did not seem to notice the compliment, and waited a long minute, looking up at the children. Then he touched the end of his stick to the first circle he had drawn, and made a musical sound in his throat like water flowing over rocks. He touched his stick to the second circle, and made a sound like rain falling on broad leaves, and then to the third, and made a sound like the piti bird. He did the same for the next row of circles, making the same three sounds in order, and then another sound, like the plucking of a bowstring.

“He is counting for us,” said Iri. “One, two, three, many.” He took Ulua’s stick- Ulua did not protest- and touched it to the circles as the kua man had done. “One, two, three. One, two, three, many.”

The kua man repeated his sounds for the last line of circles, adding one more, a sad chuffing noise something like the call of a tree frog.

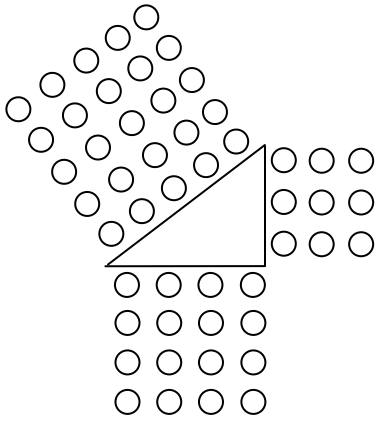
“One, two, three, many, other many,” said Caupé. “Clever kua man.” She took the stick from Iri- who did protest- and quickly drew a triangle of her own, putting the same number of circles along each side and counting them. It looked a poor straggly drawing next to the kua man’s, but he seemed pleased that she had drawn it, and sang at her a little. He did not draw any more, but spread out his wings, and squatted there watching them.

“We will need some stones, or nuts, or something, if the kua man is going to show us how to play the game,” said Ulua.

“Let us go find some, then, and see what he will do,” agreed Caupé. They went off to find stones, and they came back each clutching a handful of white snail shells from the edge of the midden. Each had wanted to bring the shells back, so they had many more than the number of circles the kua man had drawn. They put them in a pile next to the drawing, which the kua man immediately moved further away. Then it picked one up, made the water flowing over rocks noise, and placed it in the first circle. The children all kneeled close around the drawing to see how the game was played. The kua man put down the second shell with the rain-falling sound, and the third shell with the piti bird sound. He moved on to the next row of circles, and put a shell down with the bowstring sound.

“That is not many, that is one,” corrected Ulua, but Caupé hushed him. The next shell the kua man placed with the frog sound, and the next with another sound again, like the knocking of small stones together over a pool of water.

“What a lot of manys he has,” said Caupé. The kua man filled the last circle of the second line with a shell, making yet another different sound, and then took up his stick. He drew circles, and circles, and circles, and circles- moons or suns, or turtle eggs, whatever they were, until his drawing looked like this:



“It is very pretty,” said Ulua. “But we don’t seem to be any closer to playing the game.”

Indeed, the kua man had even picked up the shells that he had picked up before. He drew careful lines around the masses of turtle eggs he had drawn, and then began to place the shells again. He began once more with the sound like water flowing over stones, but went on and on and on. It seemed that for each kind of many the kua man had a different word, word after word. The children listened carefully, and heard no sound repeated. When the kua man had filled up the rows of circles on his right, and the rows closest to him, he cast the shells that still remained in the pile away, giving a little shriek like a monkey. For a moment he opened all six of his eyes wide, which gave them a shock, for they had grown used to thinking of him already almost as though he were a little man.

"What next?" said Iri. "Oh, he is going to pick them all up again and start over. I hope he does not expect us to remember all of his sounds." The kua man carefully removed all the stones again and put them in a neat pile in front of him. This time he did not them where he had before- instead, he put them along the third side of the triangle, one at a time, counting them out as he did. With the last shell, he flapped his wings, and held up two empty hands above the bare patch of dirt in front of him, showing that there were none left.

"Oh! How clever, kua man," said Caupé. 'You have set it up so that it is the same number of shells.'

'Anyone can do that,' said Iri. 'He has probably hidden the extra ones, somehow."

Patiently, the kua man removed the shells and began to show them again, as if he knew Iri was accusing him of cheating. But this time he did not finish.

Yilaue came stomping out to the kua man's house, looking balefully at the children with his unclouded eye. 'What are you doing here? You should not be talking to this thing. It only makes noises, like a bird. You should be pounding manioc, or fishing, not grubbing in the dirt like babies. I expect you are eating it, too?" He swept his heavy man's feet across the drawing the kua man had made, scattering shells, until no trace of it remained. "Ha!" he called, as though he had just beaten off a Taraui. "Now, go!"

"Yes, uncle," said Ulua, getting up to go, and a moment later Iri said and did the same. Caupé said nothing, but rose a little after Iri did and followed the two boys back to the centre of the village, glowering darkly at the hulk of Yilaue all the while.

The waters rose, and the waters fell again, leaving the igapó thick with leaves and silt. New clearings were made, and planted anew with manioc and gourds and broad beans. The kua man was of no help in the men's work of making the clearings, nor in the women's work of planting, but stood and watched all that the others did, silent or singing. And more and more often he would take himself away to a place where Yilaue would not come, far from the village, to draw in the dirt, and Iri and Ulua and Caupé would follow him.

They had begun to be curious about the way the world is put together, in a way no men before them had been curious about the world. That is why their likenesses are worked into the frieze of the great wordhunters' house in Capa-Zulare, even above the likenesses of the King and of the four war-leaders of Piri-Nauba, who sealed the victory of the Mawe and the Gê and the King over the Taraui and the Pacu-men, who worship the skinless ones and eat the flesh of their enemies. But long ago Iri and Ulua and Caupe were three children, and they followed the kua man out of the village. They learned all the names the kua man made, though they could not say them all in the same way, and had to make up their own words for the numbers the kua man showed them. Iri and Caupé knew them all up to 144 in a little time; Ulua always had trouble beyond twelve. The kua man showed them the rules for adding numbers together, and taking them away from each other, and began to show them ways of drawing them without drawing them- a great confusion to them at first. It was Caupé who

figured out that the shape with five sides was the same as twelve circles. The kua man showed them how to multiply numbers together, using nuts and shells and circles drawn in the dirt, and to divide them. All this seemed to have little point at that time, but it was interesting, and the fact- Iri said- that Yilaue hated them drawing in the dust with the kua man, that was the best reason to keep doing it of all.

Biri came a few times, and was quicker to grasp things than Ulua, but it happened a little while later just as they had feared. She was taken away for three days to the women's house, and she came out with a hole pierced in her lip to fit a shell ornament, and painted stripes on her body in red urucum dye and black genipapo dye, and a skirt of palm fibre with white and black triangles worked around the edge. She was expected to live in the women's house, and do women's things, and not play with the children anymore. She said she was happy, when she spoke with the others, but her eyes looked sad.

'We are doomed,' said Caupé, when she thought of it. "It will be the end of us. A few more months, no more." And Ulua would agree glumly, but Iri would always say there was no need to be such sour old women, worrying away at the same worry with gummy mouths morning and night.

"Why cannot we be friends, when we are older? Why can we not have adventures, and fight dread beasts beyond the forest?" He said these things, though there was no evidence they could be true, and it seemed that he believed them.

In the meantime, the eyes of the kua man were green flecked with gold like the eyes of a caiman, deep green like the jade that the Mawe had not yet seen, and they saw farther than the eyes of a man. He taught the three children without words, taught them that three sets of three things are nine things, and nine sets of nine things are eighty-one things, and how such numbers could be made solid in men's thoughts by arranging sticks and making scratchings in the dirt. The kua man learned from the children in turn how to make the words the Mawe made, though he learned more slowly than a child who is learning to speak, or an Akau traded as a wife.

To the children he taught the numbers, and also twelve words of his own language, his language that was like birdsong and flutesong and the flowing of little streams after a thunderstorm. 'Wing' he taught them, and 'water', 'sun' and 'sky'. 'Multiply', 'divide', 'add', and 'subtract', and lastly 'atom', 'law', "Jester' and 'King.' The King was one who taught the law, and taught men to obey the law, and the law was all the secrets that explained how the world was put together, rivers and trees and beasts and stars and stones and the thoughts and deeds of men and spirit-men. It was drawn into the shapes of the ripples in the water after a fish dived, and into the flesh of men and women, and made solid in stones far beneath the earth, without beginning and without end, from one end of the sky to another. Such was the law. The atom was the smallest thing there was, out of which all other things were made, and even the atom had to obey the law. The King was one who made the law known, and the Jester was one who was made to amuse the King. The great caraiba of the past had been brave, and wise, and led armies of a thousand warriors, but they were not Kings, for they did not know the law.

All these things the Jester said with scratchings in the dirt and with songs made out of unknown words. The children did not yet know that they knew these things, not to put into words, but the Jester painted the knowledge onto their hearts like a woman may paint herself with genipapo and urucum in the darkness, and only see what she has painted when she steps out into the light.

The words the kua man had taught the children drifted into the speech of the rest of the village, though to most they were only words, like the names of creatures Ua might have seen in distant parts of the forest. But men stopped calling the kua man the kua man, and began to call him the Jester, the name he had brought for himself from wherever he had come from.