

The Adventure of Prince Wai

Many, many years ago, in the land of El Dorado, later called Guyana, a prince was born by the beautiful Lake Amacu. On that day, the flat topped mountains looked more golden than ever before. Lake Amacu was like a gigantic piece of amber, cut so delicately that the light of the sun brought out all its shining beauty.

The king and queen of Amacu had long wanted a child and more than anything in the world, they wanted a son.

On that day the king called all the warriors of his tribe together for a grand feast. The cassiri for drinking was prepared by the women; the hunters brought in deer meat and labba; the fishermen brought lukanani and even the huge arapaima; the women grated and sifted the cassava to make large wafers. In the huge pots containing the old pepper pot, went somemore cassareep and the meat from the hunters' arrows.

The feasting began. The warriors with their belts of animal hide and their crowns of magnificent feathers sat around the fire. Quietly, some distance away, sat the women.

The king was resplendent in his cape of jaguar skins and his crown of feathers looked more beautiful and colourful than any of the others. The new born prince was brought before his father, the king, on a cushion made from the skin of a giant ant eater. Each warrior then bowed before the king and presented a gift of a feather to the new born prince.

Suddenly there was a great noise overhead. Hundreds of birds of all varieties flew 'round and 'round the prince. Then one bird from each flock flew down and together they formed a circle around him.

The first to speak was the Harpy Eagle. "You have our feathers, little prince", he said. "These feathers, strewn around your feet, you shall wear on your head as we wear them on our bodies. We, the birds, of the forest wish to give you more than our feathers", he continued, "and I shall give you courage and strength". The harpy eagle flew over the prince and with his beak, placed a small seed on the forehead of the prince.

The smallest of the birds, the humming bird, then stepped forward and said - "I give you, young prince, the swiftness of my wings and the ability to extract from life all that is sweet and lovely".

"I", said the Canji Pheasant, "Give you a link with your past so that you shall never forget your ancestors".

"And I", chirped the Kis-ka-dee, "give you the gift of joyful living so that each day when you awaken you will sing happily, as I do, to greet the morning".

Quietly, solemnly, the owl said, "To you, young prince, I bring the gifts of wisdom and patience".

The parrot, unable to hold his tongue any longer, said "Dear prince, I bring you the gift of sociability - of making friends with people". The Toucan, with his multi-coloured beak brought the gift of dignity and beauty.

Suddenly, a darkness fell over the gathering. Giant wings flapped. Then the mighty King Vulture descended from the sky. His red crown, fierce eyes and long pointed claws made him a frightening

sight.

The warriors drew their bows. Then the King Vulture shouted - "I know that I am not loved. All fear me for I follow death. But I have no ill will for the young prince. I wish to give him a gift as all others have done. To him I shall give not death, but life. If he is ever in danger, I will be there to help". The King Vulture then lifted his wings and majestically flew away.

Last of all to speak was a small grey sparrow. He was hardly noticed in the midst of so many splendid birds. "I bring you all I have, sweet little prince", said the grey sparrow. "Humility as well as love and respect for your mother and father. May you grow up to love your brothers and sisters and guide them with wisdom and courage".

Away flew all the birds of the great forest and never again did they assemble in such multitude, for never again was there born a prince like Prince Wai.

Prince Wai grew up like any other little boy. He learned to walk and then he learned to talk. He played with the other children, climbed trees to pick mangoes, palm nuts, tamarinds and dunks. When he was thirsty, he would climb the tall coconut tree and pick the nuts. Then he would burst the nuts with a sharpened stone axe and drink the clear water inside.

He learned to fish and hunt with his bow and arrow. The men of the tribe were noted marksmen and could shoot the swiftest fish with an arrow. Prince Wai went with the other children into the forest to collect the troolie branches which were used to build the huts in which all the people lived.

By the lake of Amacu, as was the custom, everyone shared alike. When a young man and woman were to be wed, all the members of the tribe worked together to build the house, fashion the simple furniture and cooking utensils. When the hunters brought in the meat or fish, it was shared to all the families in accordance with their numbers. When the women reaped the cassava which they had all planted together, it was shared in the same manner. Thus all enjoyed the fruits of the land and none were poor and none were rich.

As Prince Wai grew older it became clear that the gifts which were bestowed upon him by the birds of the forest were indeed rich gifts. Prince Wai grew taller and stronger than the other men of the tribe; he ran swifter than the others; his arrow shot out from his bow, always to find its mark. He loved his fellow men and they loved him. Prince Wai was kind and helpful to the old, the young, the sick and the blind. He respected and obeyed his mother and father.

But it happened that a dreadful calamity struck the people of Amacu. One by one they began to waste away and to become weak. So sickly they became that they could not rise from their hammocks. When the dreadful sickness touched his mother, Prince Wai wept and wept, for he loved his mother very much.

The king called his advisors together and they sat around a great fire, the elders in the first circle around the fire, and the young behind. The king consulted the wise men about the terrible calamity that had befallen his people. A very old man said that he had heard many years before of a similar trouble and that a

particular herb had been found, which when brewed with the bark of the tamarind tree, could cure the disease. That herb, said the old man, could be found far to the north where there were four large lakes. In one of these lakes, the water was both hot and cold. The four lakes, he said, were between two rivers, one so wide that the eye could not see from one bank to the other. There were many dangers. There were mighty waterfalls which a boat could not cross, dangerous snakes and animals as well as unfriendly people who did not allow strangers to traverse their lands.

The king listened to the words of the old man and then to the others who said that someone would have to travel north to find the herb.

Then Prince Wai stood up and addressed his father and his council. "I shall go and find the herb. My legs will run as fast as the wings of the humming bird. My bow and arrow will protect me from the wild beasts and dangerous snakes. I will find the lake of hot and cold water and will return before two moons pass, for if it takes longer, my mother and my people may then be dead".

The king, while proud of the brave words of his son, felt a fear tug at his heart. What if his only child should not return? But he remained silent, for there was a soft sigh of hope from those who listened.

Prince Wai prepared to depart. The women gave him a pouch filled with dried meat and cassava meal along with a gourd filled with fresh water. He took leave of his mother who pressed him to her and begged him to be careful and to return early. She placed a small stone in his hand and said "My dear son, if you should have the misfortune to be bitten by a poisonous snake, rub this on the wound".

Bidding farewell, Prince Wai sped from the village into the forest carrying only his bow and arrows, a sharp stone knife, his pouch of food, the gourd of water and the stone his mother gave him.

For days he travelled through thick forest and mountains. Occasionally he would stop to eat fruits he found or to shoot and eat small game. He then came to a narrow river which he decided to follow. He searched the river bank until he found a fallen tree and skillfully slipped off the bark without ripping it. With this he made a little boat which he first tested in the river before use. From the branch of a tree he made a paddle and then set off on the river, travelling north all the time. For days he travelled thus, shooting fish each day for his evening meal, which he cooked on the bank of the river.

On the fifth day of his travel he heard a noise which became louder and louder as he paddled. Soon the water became rough and then the noise became a mighty roar. Prince Wai knew then that this must be the great waterfalls of which the old man had spoken. Prince Wai paddled his boat cautiously as he came nearer the falls, not knowing what was before him. Before he could paddle to the shore to examine what lay ahead, his canoe was caught in the grip of a force stronger than his arms and his small craft. His boat was sucked into the swirling torrent and as he sought to keep the boat from overturning he saw ahead nothing but sky and madly churning water. He tried to hold back his boat from the terrible

drop that lay ahead, but as he tried harder and harder, he was drawn closer and closer to the end of the fall. Just as his boat reached the edge of the waterfall, and he felt himself going over the edge, sharp claws dug into the flesh of his shoulder and he felt himself hoisted over the mighty falls, so high that he could not see the bottom, where the thick foam from the falls led more quietly into a river.

It was the King Vulture who held Prince Wai aloft and who saved him from certain death. He was dropped gently on to the bank of the river below and the giant bird flew away.

Prince Wai decided to rest for a while. He sat for many hours watching the powerful waterfall, so magnificent, so beautiful, yet so dangerous. He planned how he would cross the falls on his return journey and promised that never again would he make such a mistake.

He continued his journey on foot and gradually saw signs that he was approaching a village. He had been warned that unfriendly tribes lived in the regions he must pass to reach the lake of hot and cold water. Prince Wai moved carefully through the forest. He wanted to avoid any clashes with warriors of a strange tribe.

Suddenly he heard a scream and then another cry and then a gasp. He ran as fast as his legs could carry him through the bush until he came upon a terrible sight. A small boy was in the clutches of a huge snake which was wound about his body. Prince Wai drew his knife and tried to grab the neck of the snake. The massive jaws which were trying to bite the neck of the boy now turned on Prince Wai. As prince Wai's hand pressed the neck of the snake, it began to uncoil from the boy's body and turn its attack on him. While his left hand squeezed the neck of the snake, his right hand thrust the knife into the body of the snake. The deadly snake fought back, slashing its tail and snapping with its ferocious jaws but Wai's strength and the knife wounds has their effects and the snake fell to the ground. Prince Wai picked up a large stone and smashed the head of the snake.

He picked up the small boy who was bleeding and unconscious. He carried him in his arms. After walking a short distance he saw some huts and hurried in that direction. A woman saw him and screamed. Soon he was surrounded by angry looking men with weapons. They tore the child from his arms, and quickly threw Prince Wai to the ground, tying up his hands and feet. They then dragged him to the centre of the village and threw him before the door of a big hut.

A man came out. He had blue marks on his chest and forehead and wore an apron of beads. On his head was a crown of gorgeous feathers. In a strange tongue he spoke, but Prince Wai knew that he was questioning him. The small boy was then brought before the king of the tribe who grasped him in his arms. Prince Wai knew then that the boy was the king's son. Some liquid was poured into the boy's mouth and he opened his eyes. He sobbed and spoke to his father who then ordered that Prince Wai be freed. Prince Wai stood up and bowed to the king, who clasped his hands in his own.

The boy led his father and all the people to the spot in the forest where he had been attacked by the snake. When the dead snake was seen a murmur of horror was heard. The snake measured

the length of two men.

They brought Prince Wai back to the village and fed him. The king presented him with a gift of a knife, longer and sharper than the one he had used to kill the giant snake.

Using his hands and drawing pictures in the sand, Prince Wai explained his mission. After he described the four lakes between the two rivers, he realised that he was understood. The king ordered one of his young tribesmen, Tomaka, to lead Prince Wai to his destination.

The next morning they left on their journey. The two young men exchanged words in their different tongues and soon they could speak to one another and they became fast friends.

After many days of travelling through the forest and across many rivers they came to the lake. Prince Wai and Tomaka swam around the lake until they came to the point where it was both hot and cold at the same time. Here, Prince Wai went ashore and found many herbs, which he gathered and put into his pouch.

"I must return to my people now" said Prince Wai and they sped through the forest as fast as the red deer. In their haste, they did not move as carefully as was necessary in the jungle. Tomaka stepped on a poisonous snake. Green, the colour of the grass and quick as lightning it reared up and thrust its fangs into Tomaka's leg. Tomaka shouted to Wai who ran to his side. Both knew that the bite of the green snake was deadly. Then Wai remembered the small stone his mother had given him. He quickly took it from the bottom of his pouch and covered the wound with it. "This will draw the poison out of your leg", said Wai. "It was given to me by my mother". In less than an hour Tomaka felt strong enough to walk. "I will return with you to your people" said Tomaka. "I wish to thank your mother for saving my life".

When they arrived at Tomaka's village, he told the King of the trip and the remarkable stone that saved his life. Tomaka begged permission to accompany Prince Wai to his home. The request was granted and the two young men travelled the same route, going south as Wai had followed going north in search of the four lakes.

A few days before the second moon appeared in the night sky, Prince Wai arrived at Lake Amacu. He and his friend were greeted warmly by the king who ordered that the herbs and the barks of the tamarind tree be brewed immediately. This was done for five days and each of the sick given a small amount to drink. On the sixth day there was great happiness in the village by the Lake Amacu, for the herbal mixture from the lake of hot and cold water had cured all the sick people.

Then Prince Wai took his friend Tomaka to his mother to thank her for saving his life. "You and my son have saved many lives in this village and we are grateful to you and your king who have helped us".

A great friendship grew between the people of Prince Wai's village and the people of Tomaka's village and they lived healthy and happy ever after.

Author's Note:

Amacu (Amuku) is a lake in the South-west part of Guyana, near Venezuela and some distance from Brazil. Thick mountain ranges,

forests and jungle separate this area from the coastal part of Guyana where are found the four lakes.

There are four beautiful lakes in Guyana, between the wide and powerful Essequibo River and the Pomeroon River. These lakes are called Capoey, Mainstay, Tapakuma and Ituribisi. In Lake Ituribisi, the water is both hot and cold. Lake Ituribisi is the southern most of the four lakes and that is why Prince Wai found the lake he was searching for before reaching the other three lakes.

The Harpy Eagle is the largest eagle in the world and is found in Guyana and areas of the Amazon River. The Canji Pheasant is an unusual bird which has a peculiar feature. The nestlings have claws in their wings which ornithologists once believed showed the link between the reptile and the bird in the evolutionary process.

Local folklore tells that a certain stone will take out the poison from a snake bite, but this has never been verified.

The great waterfalls that Prince Wai tried to cross is the world famous Kaitour Falls.

Cassava meal and dried meat which Prince Wai took with him on his journey are traditional foods of Amerindians when they travel, and when mixed with water, make a good meal.

The Anaconda snake is huge and can kill and eat a human being as well as large animals.