



Simon Eliet

Inatulele from Panama

Simon Eliet was absent when our party of travellers and interpreters arrived on the Island of Tupile. Our Colombian and Kuna guides, Armenio and Leno, parked their motor-powered canoe alongside a wooden dock. Leno extended his hand to each of us, holding us steady as we climbed ashore. Everyone felt sticky from the salt water that had sprayed into the boat during the trip.

The sun and humidity had sapped our energy, forcing us to seek shelter. But shade was sparse, and hope for a cool glass of water, soda or iced beer looked bleak. We walked from one end of the tiny island to the other, searching. We saw beautiful robust babies playing outside cane huts, while their older siblings ran freely and laughed.

Many huts had adjacent gardens, brimming with vegetable greens. Women, sitting in doorways, waved as we passed. The men of the community were out fishing in small canoes; and everyone, including us, prayed for their success. Fish is the main staple on the island, and dinner depended on the day's catch.

We quickened our pace upon the incongruous sight of a Pepsi sign over a shop just ahead. "Tienes Usted Pepsi?" I asked. "Si." replied the colorfully beaded Kuna woman standing beside a cooler. We collapsed on a bench, gulped our sodas, and rubbed the cold cans on our thighs, arms, cheeks and foreheads. This moment of peace would suffice until Simon Eliet, Tupilie's *inatulele* (botanist-chemist) returned.

Simon Eliet, Inatulele

My flashlight began to flicker when the healer arrived. "I have just come from my patient's house," Simon explained. "I am on call twenty-four hours everyday. My wife knows I am here with you if I am needed."

Simon's sun-beaten face and kind brown eyes reflected his day's work. "I am past sixty years now," he said. "When I was fourteen, I went to Colombia to study different subjects in a school there. It was very difficult because I did not understand the language. I had no idea about terminology. It forced me to apply myself. At eighteen, I entered the Colombian army and became an expert rifleman. In 1956, I returned to Panama and joined the National Guard. I trained people in jungle survival. To learn more about hospital care and clinical work, I went to the Brook Air Force Base to study at the Inter-American School. In 1962, I graduated as a clinical technician."

"How did you become a *inatulele*?" I asked. Simon answered, "Like many *curanderos* (healers), I

Tupile's youth enjoy an afternoon of traditional dance and music making.



Simon Eliet, Ric Hajovsky and Pat Moffitt Cook discuss the applications of the *inatulele* (botanist's) shamanic songs.

had two *Maestros* (teachers) — my father, a *inatulele*, and *néle*, a seer. The prayers that I sing come from the *néle*. My father taught me about the plants," he said. But before Simon completed his apprenticeship, both *maestros* died.

The *saila* (chief) of Tupile was also a fine *inatulele* and accepted Simon as his student. "We spent hours in the jungle gathering *plantas medicinas*." Often when the *saila* was called away to other islands for political meetings, his patients would come to Simon for treatment. "Slowly I built up a reputation," he said. Rubbing his forehead, looking tired, he asked for a cold *cervesa* (beer).

As he sipped, he spoke: "I go to the jungle to find medicine for my patients. First I pray to *Dios* (God) to help me locate the plants I need. God must never be separate from our work in healing," he said, staring into my eyes. He pointed his finger upward and paused for a moment. He sipped his beer in silence.

"Before we learn how to treat patients or collect the medicine, we must learn the healing songs and prayers," he said. "Without the songs the medicine will not be as effective. "I sing over plants that cure diarrhea, low red blood [cell] count, headaches and to help aggressive people control themselves."

Pregnant women can be helped when they are vomiting and dealing with morning sickness. Simon's treatments help women regain their appetites. "I treat people who drink too much. My medicine and song take away their desire to drink," he said.

"All the medicine is alive!" Simon said. He explained that the behavior of the *inatulele* is important. If the *inatulele* has done bad things then the medicine can turn bad and the patient can become more sick. "Like any good doctor I must be responsible to God and my patient. My song and intention to heal must be sincere," he explained.

Medicine that has been "sung over" will affect a better cure. The plants become more powerful. They have a resin, sap or liquid in them; some bitter, red or white that becomes activated through the sound.

"The medicine will work without the songs, but not as well," he said. "You must not separate these elements...that is simply the way."

"So your voice and song transfer an energy to the plant?" I asked. "No, *mira Pat*," he said. "*Dios* first made the *inatuleles* and then created the patients...and then created the plants. He told the plants, 'you're going to cure people.' The *inatuleles* were not created before everything, but before the plant medicine," Simon continued. "We are alive, like the plants. When the *plantas medicinas* hear the song, then they remember the job that God gave them in the beginning!"

Songs

The *inatulele* chose three songs that evening. He explained that the songs are sung in the mountains over the medicine at the time of harvesting, before the plants are cut. The prayers can vary for the same illness depending on who they are intended for. Gender and age are deciding factors. "The song is the same; the only thing that changes is the name of the person," Simon said

The first two songs Simon sang that evening were nearly identical. The first, for curing a little girl with fever (the wind way) was sung again for a pregnant woman suffering from fever. "I substitute the word *mujer* (woman) for *niña* (girl) . . . like that," he said. The last song was for a man with diarrhea caused by parasites.

"I sing in a shamanic language," Simon said. "The average person does not understand this. It is an old language. The song for curing diarrhea is saying, 'You have to cure the sick person. Remember the animals that suffer from this, dogs, parrots and goats . . . we must understand their pain. We must combat this disease,' " Simon chanted.

A traditional Kuna dance.



