



84 ❧ Simon Tshiombe, teacher turned chief

Born in 1936, Simon Tshiombe was the son of a prominent regional chief, but he chose to become a teacher. By 1952, at age sixteen, he had completed elementary school in Mutena as well as studies at the pedagogical school, and he was qualified as an elementary school teacher. He began a successful teaching career and married Ruth Dingeya in 1957. They had a peaceful family life with their twelve children. In that era teachers had sufficient means to raise any number of children.

As a teacher Simon never conducted himself as a master of events nor as a master of his pupils. Rather, he learned to listen to others, to dialogue with them. Together they learned to build a future as yet undefined.

But in 1984 events would take a different turn. Simon's father, the chief Kasonga wa Bena Lunda, had just died. It was necessary to find a successor to head the chiefdom. The family council decided to call on his son Simon. Unless he wanted to become alienated from his people, he had no choice but to bow to the will of his family and his tribe. Will there be, in the future, a way out in a situation of this kind? In Congolese society, the requirements of the village, the spirit of the ancestors, and traditions such as initiation rites must still be respected at all cost.

photo—Simon Tshiombe (left) with his father, Chief Kasonga

Thus began for Simon another type of life. Enthroned as traditional chief of the region, replacing his late father, he did not forget the commitments he had made at the time of his baptism. On that day he said to the Lord, “I have given up everything to follow you.” He spent time meditating on the word of God and practiced it in his everyday life. He helped the church in his region to build churches and schools. Torn between the requirements of traditional power and Christian morality, he forced himself to preserve the values of Christianity in his family and among the population he governed.

Simon Tshiombe was struck by an illness that weakened and nearly paralyzed him, and he died in 2004. In spite of traditional requirements, the church organized a Christian funeral for him and opposed traditional practices that accompany the death of those who have assumed responsibilities of this kind. He had acted in his work in accord with the words of Christ to Peter, “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2–3; NIV).

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