



34 ☞ A year of schooling in the forest

Sosthène Mayambi often said, “In people’s stories there are visible knots where the meaning of events meets. It is therefore necessary to make an accounting of the past and be conscious of the present, in order to sketch the roads of the future.” His own life was in some ways a combination of past and present generations and eventually those to come.

Born in 1938 at the Nyanga mission station, he came from a Christian family who believed in good education. He got a diploma from a pedagogical institute in 1958 and joined the faculty of the Mukedi Teacher Training Institute at a young age. But his education only whetted his appetite for more.

While the former Belgian colonizers had invested enormous resources in primary and vocational training schools across the country, education at a secondary level was largely found on mission stations. University level education was reserved, in their scheme of things, for some indefinite future.

Immediately after independence, Congo Inland Mission made a concerted effort to provide post-secondary training for a few select couples. Three couples were sent to the States. Another two were sent far out of Mennonite mission territory to Banjwadi in northeastern Congo, some forty kilometers to the north of Stanleyville (now Kisangani). One of these couples was Sosthène Mayambi and his wife, Pauline. There they enrolled in a theological training school. Arriv-

photo—Sosthène Mayambi in the classroom

ing in 1961, their studies were tranquil at first, and they regularly reported great appreciation for their opportunity for pastoral training. Mayambi showed strong leadership potential and soon found frequent opportunities for ministry where he was.

But by late 1964 violent change was on the way. In this region the dominant rebel group called themselves the Simba (lions). Each wave of new information spoke of their steady march toward Stanleyville. One morning a rebel troop erupted on the Banjwadi station and ordered missionaries to pack their bags. Given Mayambi's close association with them, he too was taken, leaving the rest of the little Mennonite contingent behind.

Upon arrival in Stanleyville, he was left in the hands of the Catholic bishop of the city. At the first opportunity Mayambi explained his situation, and the bishop allowed him to slip out of his compound under cover of darkness. He quickly made his way back to the mission post, where tension was high. The theology students nonetheless continued to follow the routines of worship in the station chapel.

On Sunday morning, November 8, 1964, it was Mayambi's turn to conduct the worship service. He had just begun his message when the chapel was surrounded by rebels. A few marched into the chapel, guns in hand, and seized Mayambi. There followed a tirade of accusations. They concluded their visit by beating Mayambi and his fellow students unmercifully. Threatening them with worse if they continued their chapel meetings, they left. The students limped back to their quarters.

Roughly two weeks later Belgian commandos parachuted on Stanleyville and regained control of the city. Excited rebels organized a forced march of rural populations northward, fleeing government control. In the confusion at Banjwadi the two Mennonite couples managed to slip away into the surrounding equatorial jungle. Eventually they left the twisting footpaths, picked their way through the tangle of brush and vines, and began a refugee existence. They lived on roasted cassava roots they dug from abandoned fields and on whatever they could glean from the surrounding jungle. At times they crouched motionless in their fragile shelters as foraging bands of gorillas detected their presence and frightened them with their guttural challenges. Here they hid, waited, and prayed, but despite every precaution they were discovered and forced back to Banjwadi, which was by then a rebel command post.

Even in Banjwadi, some forty kilometers to the north of Stanleyville, there was increasing evidence of government forces on the move: planes overhead, jeeploads of soldiers probing the countryside. Once again the rebels in charge made a frantic effort to force the local population to march north. Once again the Mennonite students were caught up in a mass exodus, and once again they managed to slip into the wayside forest. This time, however, they hid near the road, because they suspected that before long government troops would be coming their way.

Indeed, a day or two later they heard the sound of a vehicle approaching. Creeping through the bushes, Mayambi identified the armed men as government troops. He hurried back to the little group, shared the news, and declared his intention to return to the roadside. When the vehicle returned, he would step out, hands held high in surrender, and ask for transportation to Stanleyville.

“What if they shoot you?” his wife protested. He responded, “If we stay here, we will all die.” He returned to the roadside and flagged down the military jeep. They were taken to Stanleyville and eventually found their way back to their home areas at Nyanga and Mutena stations.

Back at home, Mayambi tried unsuccessfully to enroll in a university preparatory school. He gave up on the idea of university studies and accepted an assignment as a primary school director in Nzaji. At the time this was a prestigious position. Teachers were highly regarded. It is said that Mayambi lived up to his position as a role model, both in his comportment and in his impeccable appearance. With his white glasses and his well-styled hair, he wore as many different suits and vests as his wardrobe could hold.

God did not abandon him. A new opportunity arose to study theology in France. Back in Congo after two years, he was elevated by the Mennonite church to the post of denominational evangelist. Accompanying a national evangelist on a grand evangelization tour, Rev. Mayambi showed exceptional power in translating the word of God into local languages.

He preached the great meaning of forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation to people who often suffered from injustice. He emphasized that even in suffering, unity must be cultivated at all cost. “Suffering,” he said, “should teach us to hold to the good and not have

divisions among ourselves. On the contrary, it should unite us in the same spirit and feeling.”

This man of exemplary generosity shared his life with everyone. One would find him at the bedside of the sick, as chaplain to the forgotten and hopeless. Young people found him a source of wisdom, patience, and good advice. They nicknamed him “Deacon,” a takeoff of his family name, Diakande.

In a later interview Mayambi summed up his experience during the Simba rebellion this way: “We are here today because of the love and grace of God. I know that nothing happens to any of his children without his knowledge. Truly I once counted on four years of study in the school at Banjwadi. I went to school for four years, all right, but the fourth year of study was much different than I had expected. The Lord decided to give me a year of schooling in the forest instead of in a classroom. It was a hard year, but the Lord saw I needed it, and I give him thanks.”

Sosthène Mayambi Diakande was visiting his son in Kikwit when he died suddenly in 2007. Although he was far from home, the church district of Kikwit honored him with a large funeral.

Jim Bertsche and Vincent Ndandula