



25 ❖ Pierre Mulele's Jeunesse rebellion

In June of 1960, political independence came suddenly to the Belgian Congo, a land and people who had not been prepared for it. Well-intentioned but ill-equipped Congolese moved into government offices abruptly vacated by the Belgian administrators. For a while governmental affairs coasted along on the momentum left by the Belgian colonizers. Meanwhile there was celebration and joy all across that immense land. The resented Belgians were gone. Fellow Congolese now were in places of power. At long last they would be governed by their own brothers. All would be well.

Several years later, the scene and mood across Congo was radically different. While new government officials were content to live privileged lives in the urban centers, the infrastructure across the country had deteriorated. Sandy roads had become gullies under the torrential rainy-season rains. Little by little, bush stores had closed, making it difficult to secure even basic necessities of life. People were disillusioned and felt betrayed. Conflict broke out, often along tribal lines. Rebels in different parts of the country moved in to stir up chaos and take control.

Into the dry social tinder in Bandundu Province, in Mennonite mission territory, came a handful of clever agitators led by Pierre Mulele, who had been trained in China. Seated around the village hearth fires at night, they asked pointed questions: "How long is it since you had salt with your greens? How long is it since you were

photo—Pierre Mulele standing before his troops

able to buy a new machete? Or a lantern? Or flashlight batteries? A bicycle tire? A bottle of kerosene?” Response was prompt and bitter.

“Well,” said the agitators, “we want to start a new political party, and if you support us, we’re going to seize our land and throw out the worthless people in Leopoldville. When we set up a new government, we will remember and reward you all.” When asked who exactly *they* were, they would reply, “We are the Jeunesse”—the youth of the land.

Easily persuaded that these were people to be trusted, village after village pledged support. Beyond that, villagers promised to provide the rebels and their activities with a shield of secrecy. Soon there were whispers in the wind about shadowy activities in isolated places in the forest. When government officials made inquiry, no one knew anything! Meanwhile scores of teams of Jeunesse were being trained in hidden places and returning to their home villages at sundown, dusty and tired and secretive.

Then came the night of January 15, 1964, when these teams were unleashed on predetermined targets in a single night, slashing, burning, destroying. In a matter of two or three days they took control of an immense area of eastern Bandundu Province. Two Mennonite mission stations, Mukedi and Kandala, lay in their path. While Kandala station was sacked and largely destroyed, Mukedi initially escaped harm because of a powerful area chief, who though allied with the movement, forbade that “his mission” be touched.

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