



27 ❖ Praise the Lord! We've crossed our Jordan

History sometimes turns on surprising hinges. In this case it was a Mennonite layman named David Kipoko who singlehandedly turned the tide of the Jeunesse rebellion on its eastern flank.

Lean and sinewy, a man of direct gaze and deep convictions, Kipoko was a first-generation Christian from a village near Nyanga station, a mission post of Congo Inland Mission planted in 1923 among the Pende people of the West Kasai. In 1956 the American Bible Society recommended the revision of an existing Pende New Testament. The translation team was to include representatives from the three Africa Inter-Mennonite Mission stations that by then had been established among the Pende people. David Kipoko was the immediate choice to represent Nyanga. Though his formal training was limited, he knew his people, their culture, and their language—and most important of all, his commitment to his Lord was deep. Bringing his people God's word in their own language became David Kipoko's special mission.

The work was interrupted in the late 1950s by the furlough of the missionary in charge, and then it resumed at Kandala in the fall of 1959, at a time of powerful political ferment across Congo. During the violence that swept Kandala station in January 1964, missionaries were herded together and threatened with death. After three days in the hands of rebels, they were eventually allowed to leave on United

photo—David Kipoko

Nations helicopters. The missionaries had negotiated with the helicopter crews that they would immediately return for David Kipoko, his family, and the nonresident Bible Institute families.

At this point David Kipoko asserted himself. Gathering the institute's nonresident students around him, he said: "We do not know whether the helicopters will return. To wait here is dangerous. Gather what few things you have. We must start our journey back to the West Kasai immediately."

They were fifty-six people in all, twenty-two adults and thirty-four children—fourteen of them so small that they had to be carried most of the time. Each couple had pitiful little bundles of personal goods they'd been able to salvage from their burning homes on the night of the attack. Kipoko had rescued his most precious possession and tossed it into the nearby tall grass. This small case containing his portable typewriter had come to symbolize his personal mission in life. He assigned his oldest son to carry it on his head during the uncertain days that lay ahead. To add special anxiety, Kipoko's wife, Gin'a Laurent, was nine months pregnant.

They made their way down to the Kwilu River in evening light, crossed to the opposite bank, and bedded down in streamside brush for the night. At first light they were up and began their trek through rebel-controlled country toward the distant Loange River, which marked the border of their homeland, the West Kasai.

They walked single file, Kipoko in the lead. They were constantly challenged by roving bands of rebels. "Who are you? Where are you going? Are you with us or against us?" In every encounter Kipoko silently prayed, squared his shoulders, faced his hostile questioners, and negotiated his way past them. Around midday the travelers came to a fork in the path. The shorter route to the left would lead through a more populated area and a chance of finding food, water, and shelter at night. But Kipoko warned that they would also encounter more rebels. They would take the right fork, which, though longer, would (they hoped) mean less rebel traffic.

By late afternoon they approached a small village. Finding shade along the edge, the group dropped to the ground while Kipoko sought out the chief to ask for drinking water, food, and shelter for the night. Fearful of possible retaliation from rebels, the chief refused all their requests. The group slept in the open at the edge of

the village and left silently at dawn for another long day's trek under the tropical sun.

As the sun dipped toward the west on the second day, they came to a village situated on a bluff overlooking the distant Loange River. Once again they slumped to the ground and were almost immediately surrounded by a group of surly youth from that village, who challenged them: "We don't know who you are, but if we find out there are any Baluba or Lulua among you (ethnic groups from across the river), they will not leave this village alive." In fact, the group included students from both tribes.

In response to this menace, Kipoko asked to speak to the village chief. After again encountering fears and refusals, Kipoko eventually discovered that he and the chief belonged to the same extended clan and traced their lineage to a common ancestor. He picked up a handful of sand and tossed it into the air, signifying a claim of common kinship and land, and he pled with the chief not only to spare the lives of the strangers among them but also to provide desperately needed food and water.

The chief replied that he would convene his village elders that night and bring word of their decision within a few hours. While his exhausted fellow travelers slept, Kipoko sat among them, prayed, and waited. Finally the chief appeared out of the night shadows. He said: "It has been decided. You can sleep in peace. I've persuaded my elders to allow your whole group to leave in the morning. I do not want the blood of the friends of my kinsman on my hands."

The next morning, after food and water had been provided, the group resumed travel and came to river's edge by midafternoon, where they bargained over fees for being ferried across the river in dugout canoes. Though they had been given safe passage to the river, they were not exempt from extortion at the hands of the canoe men. Each couple had to untie their little bundles and barter bits of their last earthly goods for passage.

When the last canoe load had traversed the river marking the frontier of rebel control, Kipoko promptly summoned everyone and announced a service of thanksgiving. After singing a couple of hymns from memory, he said: "People call this river the Loange, but for us it has become our Jordan. The Lord has brought us out of a land of death and across this river. We must praise him. We still have a long path before us, and we do not know what awaits us. We have no rocks

here on the river bank with which to build an altar as did the Israelites, but our prayers of thanksgiving are the offering we lift before his face.” After prayer, they shared what little food they had left and resumed their journey.

During the late afternoon of this third day, it began to rain. Toward evening they arrived, wet and weary, at a village whose chief refused them shelter and food. Rebel country was so near that he feared retribution. It was after dark when they reached the next village, where once again they were met with hostility and fear. But at last they were permitted to throw down their mats at the edge of village for the night.

Next morning, unmindful of wet clothing and empty stomachs, they pressed on. This time their goal was a distant village where they knew a Mennonite teacher-evangelist and a cluster of Christians were living. If they could make it that far, they knew their escape was assured. With only brief stops in the sparse shade of scrubby trees, they plodded along. Finally, after dark, they approached the flickering glow of village hearth fires and the sound of shouted welcomes of Christian friends.

As children were taken from aching arms and weights lifted from bodies trembling with fatigue, the weary party collapsed gratefully on stools and mats. Early next morning a bicycle messenger was sent to Nyanga. By late afternoon the following day, a mission truck had arrived and transported them all to the mission post. Gin’a Laurent, Kipoko’s pregnant wife, quietly told her husband that she was going directly to the maternity, where a few hours later she gave birth to a son. Kipoko named the infant Gikenene (“sorrow, distress”), to commemorate the traumatic experiences surrounding his birth.

The Nyanga church council called a meeting the next morning to hear Kipoko’s news. They were not only curious but also greatly concerned, because chiefs in that area were by that time leaning toward supporting the rebellion across the river. Kipoko’s response was quick: “Invite all the chiefs and elders from the villages around us for a meeting. I’m eager to talk with them.”

Word went out, and on a given day the Nyanga chapel was packed with village chiefs and notables. Kipoko took the platform and addressed them passionately. “You’ve come to hear news about the Jeunesse rebellion across the Loange River in Bandundu Province. If you want this mission station to be burned down and you

want to lose your schools and your hospital, fine—invite them. If you want all your missionaries chased away, fine—invite them. If you want to lose your bush stores, fine—invite them. If you want your young men to be forced into destructive travel teams, and especially if you village chiefs want to be treated like slaves, fine—invite them.” After elaborating on his group’s harrowing experiences, Kipoko took his seat.

An animated buzz erupted among the chapel benches, accompanied by the sound of clicking tongues, a sign of agitation. Consensus came quickly. “If this is what the rebel movement is all about, we will have nothing to do with it. From this day our word to our people will be to resist it at every turn. Rather than cooperate, we will relay any and all information we have to the government at Tshikapa.”

Given David Kipoko’s impassioned reporting of his experiences that day, the rebellion never did gain a foothold to the east of the Loange River in the West Kasai. Kipoko served with the revision committee for another decade and lived to see the publication of a revised edition of the Pende New Testament.

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