

52 ❀ A one-egg Sunday dinner

The chief and elders of Tshingila village, located about halfway between the Nyanga mission post and Tshikapa, a territorial government center, had long resisted missionary efforts to place a teacher-evangelist among them. At annual meetings of the Nyanga church district assembly, Tshingila village was a frequent agenda item.

One year in the 1970s the delegates declared that though there had been repeated failure, some new effort needed to be made to establish a witness in that village. But how? Whom could they send? Among them in that session sat Pastor Sh'a Mayele and his wife Gin'a Mayele. (In the tradition of the Pende people, they were named and known as the father and mother of Mayele, their firstborn child, a son.) Sh'a Mayele and Gin'a Mayele by that time had successfully planted churches in several other villages of the area. The delegates asked the couple whether they thought they could also plant a church in Tshingila. Without hesitation Pastor Sh'a Mayele responded, "We can't, but God can!"

Several years passed quietly. Largely ignored by the village folk, they walked softly among them. Was someone sick? The pastor and his wife made their way to visit them and pray for them. If someone's thatch roof collapsed under the onslaught of a tropical storm, next morning the pastor was there, bush knife in hand, to help gather poles and thatch for a new roof. Was there a death? They brought food for the mourners. They also took the time to sit with people and

tell them the story of *Yesu, Mun'a Nzambi*, Jesus, the Son of God. They always concluded their sharing with a witness to the joy and peace they had found in this *Yesu* as they had reached out in penitence and faith to him. Imagine! They were no longer afraid of the darkness; they no longer feared evil spirits; they no longer needed charms or fetishes to protect them.

One day there was a knock at the front door of a missionary home at Kalonda, across the river from Tshikapa. A bike was leaning against a nearby shrub. At the door stood a man holding a thumbtaped, folded piece of paper. He explained that he was from Tshingila village and was sent by Pastor Sh'a Mayele. As he sat down on a wicker chair, he added that he was not to return without an answer from the missionary.

Unfolding the paper, I discovered an invitation to come to his village on a certain Sunday to share in a celebration. On that day the first converts were to be baptized early in the morning. Then there was to be a worship service, followed by the first-ever celebration of communion in that village. If I could join them, I would be invited "to feed the people with the word of God."

Rejoicing at the news of the first converts in what had so long been a resistant village, I gladly accepted the invitation by a return note to the pastor.

On the appointed day I made my way via Jeep over bumpy, sandy roads. Approaching the outskirts of the village, I was greeted by several men who had been sent by the pastor as a welcoming committee. I was escorted via winding paths through the village and soon found myself approaching the pole-and-thatch chapel, which was surrounded by a throng of people. Spotting us, Pastor Sh'a Mayele and Gin'a Mayele hurried to greet us with broad smiles on their faces. I was then led to a waiting line of people. They had been down to the stream at the crack of dawn for a baptismal service. In a leisurely manner the pastor introduced them to me, person by person. In every case he shared a brief personal history, including how and when they reached out in faith to *Yesu* and experienced the liberating impact of God's grace in their lives.

Though the service lasted well over two hours, it passed quickly. The formal part of the Sunday festivities at last behind us, I expressed my gratitude for the privilege of sharing in the joy of that historic

day and asked to be excused to begin my return trip to Tshikapa. “No, no,” was the response. “We want to serve you some food first.”

I tried to excuse myself without offending them, because I knew full well that Gin’a Mayele had been at the pastor’s side since early morning, an important part of all of the celebration. She had no cupboard with tinned food; she had no refrigerator; she had no time to fan her hearth embers into flame and start the laborious process of preparing an African meal. But they made it clear that I could not leave without accepting food as a token of their blessing.

Stooping a bit to enter the doorway, I was ushered into their dirt-floored living room. A little table stood in the center. I was offered a village-made chair. It had to be adjusted three or four times to bring all four legs in contact with the uneven floor. Once seated I was left alone. Gin’a Mayele soon came in carrying a small enamel bowl cupped in both hands. The bowl contained one hardboiled egg over which a couple of teaspoons of peppery palm oil had been poured. She served her one-egg dinner without apology. She gave what she had and did so with dignity, grace, and love.

I’ve had many Sunday dinners in my life that have long since been forgotten. But the beautiful experience of that one-egg meal, served in the home of Pastor Sh’a Mayele and Gin’a Mayele, will remain secure in my memory as long as I live.

Jim Bertsche