



29 ❧ A Mennonite rebel

Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi was born in 1939 at the Mukedi mission. The son of Mennonites, he was baptized in 1955 at Mukedi. He married and was the father of a daughter. And then came national independence and the troubles that followed.

The main leader of what is known as the Jeunesse rebellion that struck Bandundu Province was Pierre Mulele, who had left in 1962 to pursue political and military studies in China and returned in 1963 to begin recruiting in the capital and Bandundu Province. At the end of November, Mulele's camp numbered more than 2,500 partisans, including Damien Kandaka, whom Mulele made a commander. Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi was Kandaka's aide.

The two had come from the east, along with Antoine Fimbo. Soon Fimbo was authorized by Mulele to go back east to spread the action of the insurrection. But Commander Kandaka and Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi, the young Mennonite, stayed at headquarters. Before long, however, conflict arose between Mulele and Kandaka, and Commander Kandaka prepared to foment his own revolution.

In early December 1964, in his headquarters Mulele got wind of this and sent an expedition of 120 partisans to arrest Kandaka. By night they were attacked by Kandaka's combatants and lost twenty men.

photo—Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi (indicated by the arrow) among Jeunesse soldiers

From then on Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi broke his ties with the Mulele dictatorship. But he continued on with the rebel leader Kandaka, who turned toward the east, where in the Mennonite missionary station of Mukedi all the schools were closed and the teachers were threatened, falling prey to the rebellion. The Christians in the rebel forces, including Kumbi-Kumbi, who came from that mission, along with the population of the neighboring villages, did not want the rebels to threaten the missionaries who had come to evangelize them. Indeed, the missionaries were allowed to return to North America in safety. In contrast, the Fathers of Mary Immaculate installed at the Catholic mission of Kilembe, twenty kilometers from the Mukedi Mennonite station, were threatened and killed. However, in pursuing Kandaka, Mulele's partisans burned the first Mennonite church in the country, the hospital, and all the villages.

Damien Kandaka, who was originally from Kondo, set himself up in the sector of his origins. Back in home territory, Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi, the young Mennonite and aide to Kandaka, was able to demonstrate a spirit of love, nonviolence, and finally of reconciliation. He played the role of bridge between Kandaka and Mulele. The testimonies collected among those who shared life with him during the rebellion attest that this gentleman conducted himself more as a pastor than as a soldier. Under the influence of his aide, Commander Kandaka wrote a letter to Mulele to ask for a pardon.

In spite of much advice, however, Jean Pierre Kumbi-Kumbi did not agree to separate himself from Kandaka. In 1965, Kandaka and the young Jean Pierre fell into a confrontation with Mulele's forces and were assassinated by one of Mulele's commanders.

What is remarkable is that this man tried to stay true to his faith even in a context of permanent violence.¹

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¹ Jim Bertsche notes that it was only in reading this story for the first time in 2012 that he understood how close the Kandala missionaries came to being killed and why they were spared.—Ed.