



16 ❖ Joseph Kibuza, chaplain

Most of the people of the village on the outskirts of Mukedi were indifferent to the message of the first white missionaries who came to them in 1923. White people were entitled to their God, but village people were busy trying to cope with their own belief system. They too believed in a creating God but one who had withdrawn long ago and cared nothing about them. They were left to deal with the daily threat of evil spirits and the constant fear of witchcraft and death.

But with time the Lord honored the persistent witness of those first missionaries, and a few people began to ask questions. As the Spirit worked, a small handful of adults experienced the joy of peace that came from accepting Jesus into their hearts. Among them was a man named Kibuza. In his village he was known as one who had been deeply immersed in sorcery, but when he accepted Christ as his Savior, the change in his life was dramatic.

By that time the missionaries had opened a school. To Kibuza's deep regret, he was too old to enroll, but every time there was any sort of activity in the little grass chapel on the station, he was there, soaking it all up. He began to memorize the hymns that were sung. Several of his nephews were enrolled in the mission school and were beginning to read and write. Sometimes they brought home scraps of paper on which they'd written words of God in Gipende, their language. Kibuza would call them to his home after school, seat them,

photo—Joseph Kibuza

and ask that they slowly read the passages again and again. Before long, Kibuza was quoting Bible passages. He became a member of one of the earliest baptismal groups. Upon being baptized and taken into the Mukedi church, he chose the name Joseph.

Meanwhile, new medical work at Mukedi, led by Merle and Dorothy Schwartz,¹ was growing by leaps and bounds. Expectant mothers and people who were sick or injured were coming from surrounding villages in increasing numbers. The Schwartzes and their small Congolese staff had their hands full. They wanted to use this opportunity for witness to the hundreds who were coming for help. They needed a hospital chaplain, but who was available? When they shared their need with the local church council, a suggestion quickly followed: “What about Joseph Kibuza? He’s had no schooling but he knows our hymns, he’s memorized a lot of scripture, and above all else, he loves the Lord.”

So Joseph, a man who couldn’t write his own name, was added to the Mukedi medical staff. A neat little pole-and-thatch chapel was built adjacent to the hospital. Each morning, bright and early, Kibuza was there to greet people and invite them into the little chapel, where he would sing a few hymns, quote a passage of scripture—all from memory—and then tell his fellow villagers about Jesus. They were illiterate, just as he was, and lived in constant fear of death, just as he once had. His enthusiasm was infectious.

Joseph Kibuza was also busy in his home village of Mukedi next door to the mission station. Over time he had led a small group of his peers to a life-changing faith in Christ. Kibuza was delighted, but at the same time he was becoming aware of a problem. He only knew so many passages of scripture. He and the other believers wanted to learn more.

He paid me a visit and made a request. If he and his village fellow believers would come to the station chapel an hour early each Sunday morning, would I come and feed them with the word of God? He pointed out that he and his friends always came to church but sometimes didn’t understand everything they heard, and there was no chance to ask questions. Thus was born a weekly routine. Each Sunday morning, fifteen minutes before the pre-service meeting time, there would be a reminder knock at my back door. A smiling Joseph would announce: “Your children are waiting for you!”

1 See “The unsinkable Schwartzes” (chapter 38).

I came to treasure the hours with these believers. On one occasion I reflected with the group on John 14:1–4: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. . . . I go to prepare a place for you.” Right in front of me was seated a toothless granny, dressed in a sun-bleached blouse and frayed wraparound skirt. Her face was a map of wrinkles. Her flip-flops gave full view of toenails worn to buttons by years of encounters with rocks and roots on numberless treks along winding footpaths to her fields. Shaking her calloused hand was like rubbing the side of a leather briefcase. I doubt that she had ever been as much as fifty miles from her village.

As I taught, the old woman’s eyes never left my face. Then, on an impulse, I addressed a question to her: “*Khakha* [Grandmother], when your days on this earth are finished, where will you go?” Without an instant’s hesitation and without a word, she smiled and pointed a finger skyward.

And down at the end of the church bench sat Joseph Kibuza, an expression of sheer delight on his face.

Jim Bertsche