

Congo

RAPUOKWU

Rapuokwu Chimenzie was living his normal tribal life when, one day, the white missionaries arrived with a “peace” treaty in hand.

Basoko was his home town where he had lived all his life and planned on living until his death. The temperature was very nice outside when he walked out of his mud hut. He lived in a circle, a circle of safety. Step outside of that circle and you die. The town had a clear barrier of dirt that marked the safe zone. On one side of the town was the forest, which was filled with beautiful birds and buzzing insects. Tsetse flies flew in circles, and scorpions crawled on the ground, but it was an illusion. It was called the Dark Forest for a reason. On the other side of the circle of safety flowed the Congo River, which streamed day and night, water level never changing. All the beautiful bugs were venomous and deadly. Scorpions hid in fallen leaves ready to strike. A minefield of stinging 8 inch long scorpions. The buzzing of the bugs was a common sound. Huts were lined up in a circle with a center house, which was used for common discussions such as decision making. Rapu was the chief of his small village in the Congo basin. The town had everything it needed, as the Congo was rich with resources. Everything was peaceful. Rapu, the most respected in his town, was the main decision maker, who was treated with honor by his townspeople. He was not the eldest, but the elders helped make important decisions in an emergency. Rapu was born into a leader’s role because his father was chief.

The sun rose from the horizon, a yellow and orange light was projected onto the huts and trees. Long shadows were immediately produced. The coolness of the night was almost instantly replaced by the heat of the sun. Rapu woke first. Then the others gradually woke to start their daily tasks. Birds started to chirp loudly and a distant animal screamed in the forest.

Rapuokwu was in his hut when he heard voices. This confused him because all the voices were in another language. It was a strange sounding language that he had not heard before. Grabbing his spear by the door, Rapu ran outside. The voices were coming from the dark forest. Rapu ran and hid behind a bush, when he heard all his warriors joining him. Suddenly, he saw figures come out from the dark forest. Faces and hands painted white. The figures had multicolored skin that varied from their chest to their legs. There were five of them, and they appeared to be wearing large sacks on their backs. Rapu ran, along with all the other villagers, back to the village. Everyone was frightened at the approaching figures. As the figures drew closer, they grew at least two heads taller than anyone in the village. Rapu realized that the faces and hands of the people were not painted white, but their skin was whiter than anyone he had ever

seen before. It was the color of an acacia tree. Rapu had heard of albinos, but none in this quantity. Rapu was certain they were spirits who continued to walk closer.

As the mysterious people arrived at the huts, Rapuokwu prayed that their protective spirits would not abandon his village. The strangers came to his hut, and started speaking in chopped up Bantu. Their supposed leader, who had come out of the dark forest, said his name was Jens. They asked for a signature. Rapu would not sign the paper. He did not know what it was since they had no written language. He asked, "What is this?" in Bantu, but their only response was, "It is for peace." Rapu thoughtfully considered "peace" since these people looked harmless. The people were tall and white and had a lot of facial hair. Rapu wondered if the white giant had unnatural hair or the giant was part animal. They looked at least a child's height taller than the tallest man in his tribe. He wondered if the spirits had come to scrutinize his actions with the tribe. Many things crossed his mind.

It had been 11 months since the white man had come to his town. The white man spoke better Bantu, and they could now have conversations with Rapu. Not that he wanted to converse with these invaders. There was a conflict about the lack of respect. Rapu knew about the conflict, but he thought the white man deserved to be treated this way. After all, the spirits would not get mad for his passive aggressive actions. One day, Rapu heard a conversation between one of his villagers and a white man.

"You asked for the best I had," said the trader. As this was happening, Rapu headed towards the trader.

"Hey I just got another 10 Katanga, can I get a bottle of the best," said Rapu

"That will be 5 Kata," said the trader.

"Thanks, I will be back," replied Rapu as he walked away from the trader. Then Jens stepped in front of him.

"Why do you get it for so much cheaper than us?" said Jens looking down so he could see Rapu's reaction. The pygmie's face changed from a happy appearance to one of frustration.

"Maybe it is because I don't try to take over someone's home and land," replied Rapu bitterly.

"We are trying to give you a path to a better life and a way to make up for your sins. How is that a take over?" asked Jens.

"If you consider what you are doing for us a better life, you must not understand what you are doing! My people live in fear of what the white people will do to them. If we do not bend to their will, white men will come in larger numbers, as the missionaries have threatened will happen," Rapu replied.

"What we are doing is only in the best interest of you and your undeveloped civilization," stated Jens.

"If you truly believe that then you are blind to the situation around you," replied Rapu.

After this conversation, Rapu noticed that the white man who came into his village to talk to him came less and less. Rapu was relieved because he thought that Jens was getting scared of the dark forest where he resided. Rapu wanted the man and his people to leave. They were disrespectful to his villagers and told them lies about the spirits. Most of his village did not believe in this person in the sky called "God". That was impossible. Nobody could live in the sky. The missionaries preached that anything Rapu

prayed for would come true, which made him question his own faith. The white man seemed to have many tools and luxuries. The people must have prayed a lot to get these tools. But Rapu would not allow this. In his tribe, items were earned and not given. The feeling of anger was getting stronger in Rapu, but he kept it contained inside himself. The missionaries thought too highly of themselves. They didn't even pray to the right spirits. The river flowed through, always in the same riverbed, never changing. That is how Rapu liked it. Change was bad, everything had been good before the white men came from Belgium. Rapu was confused because the white men would speak to his villagers and most of them would reject their God, but some people would nod and accept. He wondered why. The converted villagers followed the missionaries into the dark forest. He saw them on the pathways but did not know what to think. Rapu wondered why some of the Bantu abandoned their spirits to live dangerously in the dark forest with these white people. Most of the villagers refused to speak to the outcasts. Rapu doubted that their happiness was real, but the outcasts appeared to be happy. The white man had not given a reason to believe in their so-called "God". The spirits did not seem especially angry, and Rapu wondered if he was the only one who doubted his own belief system. Rapu was conflicted, and he did not know what to believe. He was the chief and if he followed the ways of the missionaries, others would follow him.

One night, a deep peaceful sleep came over him. In his dream, he was walking in an open area surrounded by a forest. The forest was so dark that Rapu could barely recognize it as a forest. There was nothingness where he was standing. A spirit in the form of an elephant approached him and spoke in a deep, wise voice. It said, "Follow your feelings." Rapu tried to ask the spirit what that meant, but it did not respond. Rapu screamed, "What does that mean!? Who do I believe in!? HELP ME!" But the elephant only gazed at him. Rapu looked the elephant right in the eye, but all he could see was a reflection of himself holding his spear. In the background he also saw a distorted pure white figure which was burning. The spirit then turned around and ambled into the darkness when there was a flash of light. Rapu bolted upright, almost falling off his woven bed. He realized that the light was a shaft of sun coming through a crack in his roof. Rapu did not know what this meant. Who was the burning figure? Why was he holding a spear? But it made him angry that he couldn't figure it out. He decided not to tell anyone about his dream. Rapu was baffled and confused.

Rapu had his arguments with the missionaries, which never ended well. The combination of the bad Bantu they were speaking and the poor treatment of the villagers made Rapu very angry. No matter how hard he tried to please the spirits and be happy, his anger overwhelmed him. The mischievous children of the village eventually braved the dark forest, and climbed on top of the missionaries' houses and beat on the metal roofs. The children tried to time the noise making with the missionaries' prayer time. The missionaries got mad and chased the kids away, but the kids came back and did it every day to annoy them. Rapu was equally irritated with the missionaries. He was irate that they had come to Basoko. The villagers experienced exasperation and wanted to seek revenge on these intruders.

Rapu was walking home when he heard a loud commotion which echoed from far away. It was coming from the dark forest, but it was not one of the voices of his villagers. Instinctively, Rapu ran but did not know why he was running. He came upon a circle of his villagers surrounding one of the missionaries. Rapu recognized him, but

forgot his name. Was it Jens? The villagers were yelling and screaming at the white man. For once, Rapu felt a deep sadness. It was not anger but rather a feeling of misunderstanding. And then, after Rapuokwu eye's met with Jens' he saw a flash of wood flying through the air. Even though Rapu was not the one who threw the deadly spear, he felt as if he had thrown it.

After this act of violence, the missionaries ordered the villagers and Rapu to leave their home land due to their violent nature. Rapu was depressed. His villagers were warriors, but Rapu knew they could not win this fight. The missionaries had people elsewhere and Rapu knew they would call in reinforcement. Rapu agreed to leave and reluctantly told his villagers to follow him. That night, there was commotion among the elders in the main hut about the decision to leave. The people were skeptical about Rapu's decision. In the end, they agreed to leave, but did not know where to go. His people were lost in their own land, and the evil spirits frightened his villagers in the dark forest. While the children cried, Rapu felt regret for having signed the papers. The missionaries were evil snake-tongued people. Anger and regret flowed deeply through Rapu.

The villagers walked with Rapu and came upon a another village. Rapu headed directly to the chief of the village. Rejection. Again and again, walking from village to village. More villages turned Rapu's tribe away. The tribes did not want sickness, or to feed these strangers.

He was leading his people nowhere. All they did was walk through the dark forest and ask the spirits for forgiveness. Rapu knew that this was his fault and he was deeply saddened by the crisis. They wandered day and night through the dark forest through thorny bushes, and near deadly bugs and carnivores. Rapu lost two villagers in the first week of travel as more and more villagers fell ill. He could not sleep at night and lost his appetite. Some people tried to help him. He wished that he had told his villagers not to kill the Jens man.

The villagers were walking through the dark forest when they saw Rapu sleeping peacefully on a bed of dirt. He was there, but would not awake. Upon close inspection, the villagers noticed that a snake had bitten him on his arm, a place where no snake could reach from the ground. Had he tripped on a root and been bitten? Rapu was not known as clumsy, and he rarely tripped. The villagers knew.

One villager asked, "Why did he do this?", but no one responded.

Rapu was left in peace in the forest. Basoko was left behind to be colonized. Their way of life had been destroyed.

JENS

Jens Peeter had finally left this hellish place of Basoko in the Congo Basin. After two long years, there was a list of things that he would not miss, but at the very top of

this list was the oppressive overwhelming heat. It was the first thing he had noticed when he got to the Congo. At least he wouldn't have to deal with that anymore.