

“I Am Your Other Wife”

“Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:20,21; King James Version).

Our first day among the Baluba people of the Kasai in Congo back in 1954 had been a long and difficult one. We had driven over dusty, sandy roads since early morning to reach our new home at the Bibanga mission station, arriving at dusk with three road-weary, dirty and hungry children. The warm welcome by Africans and missionaries was appreciated, as was the bath, the feast of wild guinea, and finally, bed.

The children were safely tucked in with mosquito-net protection, and my wife Merry was almost asleep when I started to turn down the kerosene lamp to finally put an end to the long day. Then the back door opened. Bare feet padded along the back hall. Into our dimly lit bedroom moved a graceful old African woman who was to become a powerful influence on our lives.

“*Muoyo tatu Kalambai,*” she said. (The words meant “Life to you, father Kalambai”; that was my name among the Baluba people.) “I have come to bring you this present.” In her outstretched arms was a small chicken.

Just what I have always needed, I thought, and wondered how Merry would like this one in her bed. But Merry wasn’t a farm girl and had not yet developed sufficient appreciation for my farmer’s humor to receive such a surprise.

The smiling old lady bowed and said, “My name is Tshiela. Your wife is also Tshiela. She is named after me.”

“We are honored, *Baba* [Baluba for “Madam,” more or less],” I replied, and I thought the deal was closed. Little did I realize the financial implications of having my wife named after this interesting African woman.

“Your wife is Tshiela. I am Tsheila. She is named after me. I am your other wife,” she said with the funny little laugh we would come to know so well. Quickly she turned and gracefully moved out of the room, down the hall, and into the night, leaving the back door open as she left.

“Who is this woman who calls herself my other wife?” I asked a fellow missionary the following day.

“Oh, she is one of our colorful characters around here, and her story is amazing,” my colleague replied. “When you accepted the chicken last night you became more or less responsible for her.”

“I appreciate you telling me that now,” I answered. “What is her story, and what should I do now?”

It seems Tshiela Harieta had been the third wife of an important tribesman across the river in Bakua Kalonji. When her old husband died no one wanted her because she had given him no children. She was faced with the option of becoming a village prostitute or a medicine woman who talks with spirits. But prior to her husband’s death Tshiela had heard the gospel from a visiting missionary and had acknowledged *Yesu Kilisto* [Jesus Christ] as her new Chieftain, thus becoming a member of the New Tribe. Transferred to this New Tribe, along with all the beauty of her tribal culture, were the Christian virtues as they were understood among her

people at that time: Tshiela did not want to become a prostitute or a shaman in the village of her husband.

To become a medicine woman, Tshiela would have had to pass through initiation rituals. For those rituals, the strongest medicine person in the area is called to the village. This powerful spiritual leader, usually a man among the Baluba, calls together all the practitioners of native medicine and magic in his area. The village then goes into a five-day drinking festa. On the third day, amid much dancing and drum beating, a grave is dug about 10 feet from the village spirit house. At dusk, after drinking all day, the candidate is forced to lie down in the grave, and a mat is placed over the hole. After a period of very active and noisy incantations, large stones are piled on the mat, the hole is closed, and dirt is piled on the grave of the “departed.” After two more days of drinking and dancing, the chief shaman calls the village together around the spirit house and calls out the medicine women who have remained secluded inside since the sealing of the grave. One by one the women come out of the holy house, with faces painted white and wearing flowing white robes. Finally the candidate—now a member of the shaman society—joins the group, having come from “death” to “life.” During the days of her “death,” she has been instructed in all the necessary wisdom of her new profession.

“How does the person get out of the grave and into the spirit house?” I asked Tshiela one day when she was telling about the customs of her people.

“During the time the others are waiting in the spirit house, they dig a tunnel to the grave. When the mat is placed over the open grave, the candidate crawls through the tunnel to the house.”

“What if she doesn’t make it?” I asked.

“Then she doesn’t come back from the dead,” Tshiela answered with her characteristic laugh.

“Why didn’t you want to be a medicine woman, Tshiela?”

“In the New Tribe, I talk only with the Holy Spirit, and through Him I talk with Jesus and with *Tatu Nzambi* [Father God]. All other spirits who talk with men are evil and come from the devil.”

“Who is the devil?” I asked.

“He is the chieftain of all the dead spirits who are not in the New Tribe,” she answered.

“How did you escape doing what the village leaders wanted you to do, Tshiela? I thought you had no choice beyond the two options they gave you.”

“I went into the forest to pray. Then I ran away. I came here to Bibanga to join the People of God who live here in God’s village. The People of God are good. They let me live here and help the people of my new tribe,” she said with a cheerful laugh.

Tshiela worked at the hospital where Merry served as nurse and teacher. Tshiela’s duties concerned poor, sick people who were unable to bring their family with them to help during their illness. (Each patient had to have someone to cook food for them and to help in any other way necessary.) When food ran short or ran out completely for the patients under her care, Tshiela went into action beyond her regular duties. Our home was usually her first resort, since she considered herself my “other wife.” After all, was not my wife named after her? And had I not accepted the white chicken she had given me?

About three months after our arrival at Bibanga, Tshiela came to our door. “*Muambi* {Preacher}, there is a very sick woman in the hospital who needs meat to get stronger. Can you give her meat?”

Meat was hard to come by in those days. I hunted for about half the meat we ate, and hunting in the Congo heat was hard work. Beef was transported by truck from a town some 50 kilometers [about 30 miles] away and then brought to our station by porters walking all afternoon carrying the meat in a box on a pole between them. (Sometimes the meat men got drunk along the way, and the afternoon hike became a two-day disaster.) Their arrival was usually announced by the smell of overripe meat, and the flies assured us that the precious cargo was still in the box. (We were always interested in seeing what was inside—it was never quite the same as what we had ordered.) Merry would bathe the meat with vinegar to cut the unwanted savors, and we would try to get it cold in our kerosene refrigerator—when that appliance was working. Beef, well-cooked to disguise problems of overripeness, was a much-anticipated pleasure enjoyed only twice a week, and we were not eager to share it with anyone beyond our family. [In time I would be able to build up a herd of cattle sufficient to supply some milk and meat for those villagers in greatest need, but that was not the case when I arrived. I would also be able to increase of chicken and rabbit production, but this too would take time.] So Tshiela’s request for meat to help a poor, sick woman I had never met nor cared to meet presented problems. “Tshiela, I have no meat for your friend,” I said, being less than entirely honest. “I am sorry I cannot help you,” I added, this time quite honestly.

“That is all right, *Muambi*,” she answered. “I understand.” Then, after some hesitation, she said, “I saw the white rooster I gave you in the pen when I passed. He is big now and ready to be eaten, isn’t he?” Her happy, congenial laugh somewhat softened my anger. I was looking forward to that fat rooster for our Sunday dinner, and it was not easy to see him go to feed someone I had never met.

“Thank you, *Muambi*,” she said, and she went happily on her way to the hospital to feed her sick patient in need of meat. I felt that Tshiela was making me a better Christian than I really wanted to be.

As the years passed Tshiela became thinner and thinner. She moved more slowly among her suffering patients. Merry virtually exhausted her vitamin supply trying to build Tshiela back to normal strength. Finally we discovered that she had been giving her food to the poor patients, starving herself in the process. It took a lot of convincing to help her see that she could not continue helping others if she was not able to work. And helping others was her duty as a member of the New Tribe.

One morning Tshiela arrived in our yard with an old, naked woman. “Why did you bring this naked woman into our yard,” I asked with some irritation.

“She has no blanket, *Muambi*, and the nights are cold.”

I was wiser now in the ways of African women and deeper in the customs of the Baluba people. Leaning on logic understandable to the Congolese, I answered, “Tshiela, this woman is not a member of the New Tribe. (Most of our Christians wore clothes by that time.) There are countless naked women all around us who have no blanket tonight. You would not want me to show *kansungasunga* [partiality], would you?” I knew I had her there, because partiality is looked upon unfavorably among the tribesmen.

“That is right, Muambi,” she cheerfully replied. “You can’t show partiality, and there are so many people who have need.”

As she made her way down the path to the hospital, she was singing her strange, happy little song, and I had the feeling I hadn’t heard the last of the subject. As darkness settled over the Lubilash Valley and we were eating our evening meal, someone clapped at the door. [The Congolese always clap their hands to let you know they are there. The next step in the ritual is to ask, “Who is there?” The answer must be, “*Memo, munto*,” meaning “me, a person” (that is to make sure you are not being called by a spirit). “Person who?” is the next question. And the reply is the name of the person calling.] I went through the customary Congolese protocol until our caller identified herself as Tsheila.

Sensing problems, I said to Merry, “It’s Tsheila. You had better take it. It’s hospital business.”

“No,” said my usually cooperative wife, “this is your deal.”

Outside on the back porch I found Tsheila squatting—naked like the old woman who had come this morning. “*Muoyo* [life to you], Tsheila,” I said in greeting, and she returned “life” to me.

“It has been a hot day, has it not, *Baba Tsheila*?”

“Yes, *Muambi*, it has been very hot.”

“It looks as if it will get quite cool tonight, don’t you think?”

“Yes, *Muambi*, it is already getting cold.”

“Is that right? Then why are you naked, if you are cold?”

“I gave my dress away to the poor woman who was here this morning.”

“Then I guess you will sleep cold tonight, Tsheila,” I said with fine, manly firmness.

“Oh no, *Muambi*,” Tsheila replied. “I gave my dress away because you could not show partiality to the pagan woman with all the others around us in need, and that is right. But I am of the New Tribe of the Jesus People, and you could not leave me in need, could you?”

A little while later Tsheila padded down the path toward the hospital wearing a new dress and a new blanket draped around her shoulders. She thanked me with a happy laugh and departed singing her funny little song about the goodness of God.

“Thank you, God,” I prayed, “for Tsheila, who helps all to be better Christians than we would be without her.”

Tsheila Harieta comes as near as any person I have ever met to following our Lord’s command: “Lay up for yourselves treasure in heaven . . . for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matthew 6:20,21).

Excerpted from The Man in the Leather Hat by Paul B. Long Sr., Baker Book House, 1986, by permission of the author. Dr. Long’s book is a collection of his short stories about his experiences on the mission field in the former Belgian Congo and later in Brazil.