

Kwa - Namakunde

AN INTRODUCTION AND AN EXTRACT

CHAWANDA KUTSE

Kwa-Namakunde is based on the history of the Bakongo kings. The history of Mbanzakongo actually extends over about a century and a half, about which very little detail is known. Besides being a very free reconstruction, to the point of mythologisation, Kwa - Namakunde is in several ways a dramatic compromise . . .

MOST IMPORTANT ARE THE DICTATES of short-wave broadcasting. The play is the result of an experimental series for the BBC's African service. For the earlier plays material was drawn from English and European folk drama and in the course of four plays the freer content and style of Kwa-Namakunde was evolved.

Unfortunately the problem of poor reception, especially in East Africa, raised its head after the first version of the play was written. Sound effects had to be cut out entirely and a form of narrative introduced. In the ordinary way narrative in radio drama is the last resort of incompetence. The narrative in Kwa-Namakunde is an attempt to overcome this. The rôle of the narrator is at least equal to that of any of the characters and sets the tempo of delivery. Apart from setting the scene it must also create atmosphere, dictate the tempo at which the dialogue must be delivered and create the impression of a crowded stage.

The second point of compromise is one dictated by the nature of drama in the

BBC's African theatre. Plays require to be acceptable in most of Africa and must therefore avoid being too regional. Dramatically this is a great disadvantage. However, available casts are usually drawn from various parts of the continent and it is essential to produce material that will fit the tongues of all.

In Kwa-Namakunde more accent is placed on plot and technique than on the creation of character. This may fall strangely on the ear attuned to Western drama. The material dictates this and apart from other reasons liberation from the obsession with the individual character leaves greater freedom of ideas and more opportunity to convey information.

For this reason dialogue is created not as individual speeches, but as short snatches which cumulatively from a line which, in tempo and other characteristics, can be manipulated. It is the total scene and not the individual character which is being presented to the audience. In a way, language is used much as musical sound to create a cumulative impact.

In reading Kwa-Namakunde it should be remembered that there is a rising line, both of events and presentation throughout the play until the diminuendo at the death of Magude at the end.

CHAWANDA KUTSE, a South African living in Britain, has had ten radio plays broadcast in the past five years. This extract from and introduction to Kwa-Namakunde is the first of a series on African radio drama.

NARRATOR: *The Priest Tomasso went away from Namakunde, walking with good men whom the King had sent to take him to a friendly town away from Namakunde. He walked slowly and he looked back often and the tears were in his eyes. For in that talk with Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde he had seen what others would soon see. . . .*

But things do not stand still. Magude had not been in too much of a hurry. The gates of the great city Namakunde closed, the men stood ready and soon, within a day, the clouds of dust were coming up towards it, the dust from the wheels of the white man's cannons and his soldiers, the dust from the feet of Yaka warriors. The dust rose in a great cloud that turned the blue sky yellow and in the distance were the voices of the armies that were coming on to Namakunde.

By that same evening already the scouts, the spies were creeping up to the walls of Namakunde and the small patrols that Magude sent out through a little gate were meeting them. This was like two dogs who meet and sniff and look, trying to see each others' strength, trying to sniff and see what each would do.

When the sun rose the next morning, the tents and camps of the white man and the Yaka stretched like a sea around the city and the armies formed together into spear of men which would attack the walls and try to break them down.

Again the dust rose as the men came forward, rank after rank white soldiers and along their sides the Yaka, creeping, jumping, eyes shining with the thought of slaughter.

But they come slowly, for they do not know what waits for them. Since the death of that Kabindi there are no more traitors left to tell them.

They come and suddenly, the trumpets of the white man cut the air, their feet become like thunder and they charge against the walls. The men of Namakunde fight, their guns spit death, their sabres flash and the white man must stop still, fighting and pushing, but stopping in just one place.

[Pause].

The noise of battle comes into the church where Joao, Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde, kneels and prays, or does not pray but merely kneels and thinks.

The priests chant out a service of mourning for his son. They chant in regular voices for the rest of his son's spirit.

PRIEST (BASS): Dies Irae.

TENOR: Dies Illa [etc.]

Joao Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde kneels and thinks, thinks of his son, his son now dead. His only son, the only son of Namakunde.

Ai! Nsofu, who calls himself Joao, sits and thinks and while he thinks despair comes. His son is dead and with his son he has also died and with him dies his city. He thinks and despair deepens in his heart.

He looks up and he listens to the chanting of his priests, he look at the great stone building where their voices float about, thin and sad, their voices of death, the death of his only son. . . .

Despair curls round his heart and squeezes

as one would squeeze a fruit. Despair with its claw tried then to squeeze the life out of the heart of the King of Namakunde. . . .

But, Joao, Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde, stands up.

JOAO: Hey, you, Priest! Make me a prayer for Victory.

There is silence in the great hall of the church.

JOAO: Priest! And you others, make me a prayer for victory.

BASS: Your majesty, this is a mass for the dead.

TENOR: Your majesty, we cannot just change it.

BASS: Your majesty, victory is of this world.

TENOR: Your majesty, think of your soul and its passage to the next world.

BASS: Pray, your majesty, pray for your salvation. . . .

TENOR: Pray, your majesty, pray that your soul may. . . .

JOAO: Silence, you ravens, you vultures. Pray me a prayer for victory, a prayer for the victory of Namakunde, a prayer for the victory of Kwa-Namakunde.

BASS: Your majesty. . . .

TENOR: These are heathenish things. . . .

Joao, Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde, leaps forward and pushes them out of the way. Leaps forward up to the altar, waves his arms and sets the cross flying, waves his arms and throws over the great candelabra. He tears the cloths away and stands there, the fire of rage shining out of his eyes.

JOAO: Make me a prayer for victory, make me a victory, priests. What is this talk of yours of souls? Is not my soul the city of Namakunde? Am I not its father and its soul? Make me a prayer!

BASS: This is sacrilege. . . . God strike him dead!

TENOR: Destroy him and his house. O Lord, destroy him and his house for he has defiled your holiness!

JOAO: Take your god and take your church and take your songs away with you. Look at me, here I stand. Do you know my name?

BASS: Your name is cursed.

TENOR: Death fall on your name.

JOAO: My name is Nsofu, the son of Mukango, the son of Sitari. Like my fathers I rule this city. My name is not king, my name is not prince, my name is Kwa-Namakunde! Look, little priests, here is Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde!

Kwa-Namakunde!

Now he calls himself Kwa-Namakunde, Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde.

He leaves the priests to flap their robes like birds, birds of carrion, great bald vultures, flapping their wings. He leaves the church and hurries to the walls. He hurries, he runs and as he runs he dances, shouts and sings. . . .

JOAO: Banda! Zulu! Jere! Your spear, great fathers! Your son takes your spear, great fathers. . . . Come, fathers, let us fight, let us struggle with these white men and these Yakas! Come, let us dance and strike and spin the spear and strike our blows. . . . Kwa-Namakunde like you before me!

O Fathers! O Banda, O you who planted your great spear to mark the place of Namakunde! O midnight sky of whom we are the stars and you the great black source!

Nsofu runs to the walls where Magude stands brave, his feet planted apart with their roots in the ground—a mighty tree against which the enemy shatters itself.

He stands victorious, Magude, his face shining with sweat, his eyes shooting spears of courage. . . .

Wehe! But outside the walls wait the white man. He waits there with his cannon, he waits there with his guns, he waits there with his swords. . . .

And inside? Yo! The men of Namakunde are small because they fight without their father, they fight without Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde. . . .

Tkaaai!

Look at Nsofu! He springs and stands next to Magude!

JOAO: Men of Namakunde! I have come!

MAGUDE: King Joao!

JOAO: Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde! Your father, men, who wears the name of our great father Banda! Who wields the spear of our great father, Banda!

Hau! Look at the men now. They grow until they are giants. They cheer, they stamp their feet, they sing the songs of Namakunde, the great praise songs of Namakunde! He! The sound is like thunder and it rises like birds. . . .

And it settles with the white man, who listens and says to himself: "Hau, these men of Namakunde, they have found a new thing that will make them strong. We must attack them now before they eat too much of it and grow so strong that we can no longer fight them!"

The white men come together, slowly, carefully they look at the walls. . . . "There," one of them points, "There is a weak spot, let us charge. . . ."

They call their men, their voices cut the air like knives, their feet roar on the ground and the dust spreads like a thunder-cloud.

They charge!

He! Nsofu! He! Magude!

Look at them. . . . elephants, lions!

They stand side by side and wipe away the white man's soldiers. Wipe them away from the walls as if they were locusts. They pour their anger like fire and lightning on the heads of the white men.

O Kwa-Namakunde!

O greatest general, O Magude!

The white man comes like water, like waves of water. But the walls of Namakunde and the anger of its father stand like mountains and the waves of soldiers break and scatter.

Then they draw back, these proud Portuguese, they draw back to a distance as they sit and wait like hyenas round the outside of the firelight when men sit in the warmth and eat.

Oh, the blood flowed like a river and the corpses lay like stones that day. Oh, it was a feastday for the cannibals, the Yaka that sniffed at the heels of the white man.

And so, in the silence the sun turned red as

blood in the west and slowly left the sky. The white man lit his fires and the Yaka crept towards the dead men, their knives shining in the last small sparks of light.

And in the darkness, the men of Namakunde guarded the walls, standing like great rocks, their faces to the white man's fires. . . .

Come nearer, sit here close around me and listen to the story of that night, the night of Lifiqane, the night of the great scattering of the end of Namakunde.

You young men, you must listen, for there is a truth in this, a great and heavy truth. So we must speak about it with respect and put the proper words right in their proper places. We must look at these words and choose them carefully and see that they are good whole words. For when we've put them all together what they say will break our hearts. . . .

Eye! Nsofu.

Eye, Namakunde.

Eye, Kwa-Namakunde. . . .

Long ago, in the beginning, the creator made men. And inside man he put a heart and shaped this heart to shape the man. And when a man comes and makes this heart of his new, makes it into shapes and colours it was never made in by the first creator, he cracks his heart and then he cracks himself.

Ehe! Mai-mai. . . . So it was with Nsofu, Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde, King Joao.

Heh! My children, my sons, this is a great thing.

For that night, that night of victory, Nsofu became mad and lost his reason. Some people say it was the witchcraft of the white men, some say it was the curses of the priests. . . . But listen to me. Nsofu went mad because his heart had cracked and then he cracked.

But listen to the story:

Magude went round and spoke to sentries, gave his orders for the night, saw the wounded comfortably cared for, wept with those who'd lost a comrade, for, indeed, his soldiers were like sons to him. Then he went up to the palace to search out Nsofu, so that they could make their plans of battle for the victory that would follow.

But what was this he found there?

JOAO: Heh! We'll drink their blood and eat their flesh. . . .

MAGUDE: Kwa-Namakunde. . . .

JOAO: Ah, Magude, my brave Magude. Such a feast we'll have tomorrow. . . .

MAGUDE: Kwa-Namakunde. . . .

JOAO: We'll swoop on them like birds of prey and tear their hearts out from their chests. . . .

MAGUDE: The men will fight for you, they will fight like men of old, like the heroes. . . .

JOAO: Yes. . . . Hey, Magude, come here. . . .

MAGUDE: Yes?

JOAO: Magude, somebody's been to see me.

MAGUDE: Who, Kwa-Namakunde?

JOAO: Banda.

MAGUDE: Banda?

JOAO: (laughs) I see that I surprise you. Don't you believe me. Don't you think that father Banda will come back to guide me. Kwa-Namakunde?

MAGUDE: Of course, of course. . . .

JOAO: Ai! This Banda's a clever man. . . . There I was, just now, before you came, standing in my great hall, and Banda came, out of a corner, out of the darkness like a shadow. He held out his hand towards me, showing me to follow into the shadows so that we could talk without his being seen. . . .

MAGUDE: Great Chief, King! Please, will you sit down. . . .

JOAO: So I followed him into the darkness and he whispered in my ear. Oh, his breath was cold as dawn and his hands flowed over my shoulders like rivers of cold water. . . .

MAGUDE: Nsofu, I have known you since we both were children in your father's house. . . . What is this you say?

JOAO: And, Magude, you know what Banda told me?

MAGUDE: Ai! No, my king, I do not know what Banda told you.

JOAO: Heh-hehe . . . This Banda's clever. This Banda told me great things. . . . Hey, Magude, listen. Banda tells me he wants the ambassador. . . .

MAGUDE: What?

JOAO: Banda tells me I must sacrifice his excellency by impalement and by fire. . . .

MAGUDE: But it was Banda, he himself, who stopped such things amongst us when he made this city. . . .

JOAO: That was then, Magude. . . . But that's not all. . . . Magude, listen carefully to what I say. You must now go out and bring together

all the guns, all the gunpowder, all the swords that our soldiers use. You must bring together our three cannons and all the foreign ammunition and pile them up beside the main gate. . . .

MAGUDE: This is madness. . . .

JOAO: You must tell our men to gather up their sticks and spears they use for hunting. . . .

MAGUDE: But we cannot fight guns with sticks and spears. . . .

JOAO: These are orders, orders from father Banda.

MAGUDE: King, Father! Do you want us to be sold in exile like our neighbours? Why is it we have lived so long and fought against these white men? It was because we have their weapons, we have guns and swords, we have our great stone walls. . . .

JOAO: Banda has promised me a victory if we do this. . . .

MESSENGER: (running and panting) Magude . . . There has been a movement in the white man's camp. Our spies say they will come together at the main gate of Namakunde. . . .

JOAO (laughs) There, you see, Magude. Banda told me to gather our soldiers round the main gate. . . .

MAGUDE: It is madness. I will not do what you say, Father.

JOAO: Then I will do it by myself and you can stay here, traitor. If it was not for the love I bear you, Magude, you would join his excellency the ambassador on that fire. . . .

This was not witchcraft, this was madness.

The spirits of the old ones do not come like that, out of corners, out of darkness like mice. . . . All the sorrow, all the hardship, had at last cracked Great Nsofu. Cracked him very easily because he had not been whole for years.

Ai, the story of that night.

Nsofu left Magude and went around from regiment to regiment, from man to man, giving out his orders, seeing that the arms were piled up by the main gate. The men shook their heads in worry, but obeyed him. Was he not Kwa-Namakunde?

Slowly the pile grew, and in the torchlight, red like blood, there piled up by the main gate of the city guns and cannon, swords and other arms I do not know about. And slowly, bit by bit, the gunpowder, great black barrels of fire and death, piling in amongst the other things. All together. . . .

And the men stood round, armed for hunting, not for war. They stood around and spoke in whispers, moving their feet as if they did not know how to stand. And their eyes shone large and white when the flickering flame of a torch came near them. The fear rose from them like a stink, a great stink of decay. For they were sane and knew what lay before them.

But they obeyed, for had not Nsofu Kwa-Namakunde spoken?

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