

WAR DRUMS ON THE EQUATOR

A Play of Seven Scenes

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CONGOLESE people, you are not alone in your just struggle. All the Chinese people are with you. All people throughout the world who oppose imperialism are with you. U.S. imperialism and the reactionaries of all countries are paper tigers. The struggle of the Chinese people has proved this. The struggle of the Vietnamese people is proving it. The struggle of the Congolese people will surely prove this too. By strengthening national unity and persevering in protracted struggle, the Congolese people will certainly be victorious, and U.S. imperialism will certainly be defeated.

— From the Statement of Chairman Mao Tse-tung in Support of the People of the Congo (Leopoldville) Against U.S. Aggression, November 28, 1964

THE CAST

MUKANIA, *an unemployed worker, 60*

MILINDI, *his elder son, in his thirties*

MWANKA, *his second son, in his twenties*

MOLOBO, *his son-in-law, in his thirties*

ROCHALI, *his daughter, Molobo's wife*

BERRY, *Molobo's daughter, 12*

WALCO, *an unemployed intellectual, 35*

WARREN, *an American Negro soldier, 35*

CARBY, *a guerrilla fighter in his twenties*

TEACHER

Guerrillas of the patriotic forces and civilians

WAYNE, *U.S. army general, adviser to the UN mission in the Congo (L), in his fifties*

LUBENS, *former Belgian governor in the Congo (L), now general manager of the Katanga Mining Company, in his sixties*

GILBERT, *a U.S. captain in his thirties*

TSHONDRA, *Tshombe's representative in Leopoldville, ostensibly a lieutenant-colonel under Mobutu*

U.S. CORPORAL

UN soldiers

PROLOGUE

THE FIGHTING CONGO

SCENE 1

EIGHT DAYS OF INDEPENDENCE

Time: July 1960

Place: In front of the residence of the former Belgian governor in the Congo (L)

SCENE 2

UNREST IN THE OASIS

Time: One morning six months later

Place: Mukania's wooden cabin

SCENE 3

BAYONETS UNDER THE OLIVE BRANCH FLAG

Time: The same afternoon

Place: The residence of the former Belgian governor, now the headquarters of the UN adviser mission

SCENE 4

AN ACT OF JUSTICE

Time: The same evening

Place: The jungle outside Leopoldville

SCENE 5

WAR DRUMS ON THE EQUATOR

Time: Dawn the next day

Place: Mukania's home

SCENE 6

THE ROAD TO FREEDOM

Time: One evening three years later

Place: An old fort on the bank of the River Congo

SCENE 7

THE FIRE SPREADS

Time: About five days later

Place: The fringe of the jungle controlled by the patriotic armed forces

EPILOGUE

MARCH FORWARD, THE CONGO!

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PROLOGUE

THE FIGHTING CONGO

(Recitation)

The sun of the equator, fierce as fire,
Shines on black heroes and black heroines;
In the storm sweeping the Atlantic
Beats the heart of Black Africa.

Congo! Storm-tossed Congo!
For eighty years and more
Scarred and battered,
Chained and fettered,
What long agony was yours.

In eighty years and more
Seventeen out of thirty million of our black brothers
Were enslaved or massacred.
Ah, storm-tossed Congo,
What long agony was yours.

Today
A thunderstorm lashes the Atlantic
And the clarion call of our age reverberates above Black
Africa:

"Arise, you prisoners of starvation!"

"Arise, you who refuse to be slaves!"

Black Africa is awakened!
The Congo is awakened!

Independence is not to be had simply for the asking,
Men who want freedom
Must take up arms and fight!
Your own black hands
Must free the black continent.
Stand up and fight,
Progressive continent!
Awakened Africa!
War drums sound on the equator,
Congo! Fight on!

The curtain rises.

A black Congolese stands with bowed head, fettered with heavy chains. Mournful music sounds as if the River Congo were lamenting, pouring out her grief to the world.

At the sound of the stirring drum-beats the man raises his dauntless head and, drawing boundless strength from the millions of his brothers fighting throughout the world, smashes his heavy chains.

"Forward, Congolese brothers! To arms, Congolese brothers!" The battle song inspires men to charge the enemy.

He raises his fists and beats his long drum, giving the signal for battle. The roll of the war drums is like the galloping of ten thousand horses.

A sea of fire, a sea of flags. . . .

Great flames leap up. A free and independent Congo will surely be reborn like a phoenix from the flames of the struggle.

A great globe revolves on the back-cloth. This gives place to the title *War Drums on the Equator*, which fades away to the strains of martial music.

SCENE 1

EIGHT DAYS OF INDEPENDENCE

July 1960, during the days of independence in the Congo (L).

Leopoldville, the capital of the new Congolese Republic. Luxuriant tropical trees cast a green shade in front of a mansion near the busy centre of the city.

As the curtain rises a jubilant crowd gathers in front of the former Belgian governor's gate, rejoicing wildly over their independence. Carrying national flags and pictures of Lumumba, they celebrate their longed for independence with singing and dancing.

Rochali (*joyfully*): Freedom! Independence! We are really independent!

Walco: Yes, Rochali, we are really independent. Independence like coconut wine and peacock's plumes is making our hearts beat faster and going to our heads. We longed so much for independence that it has made our people wild with joy.

Second Youth: This is the eighth day of our independence. Never again shall we be enslaved by the colonialists, the Belgians.

First Youth: Now the Belgian governor's mansion belongs to our people. Rochali...

Rochali: I worked here as a maid for the Belgians, and now I'm free.

All: Free! Let's dance. (*They dance round the flag.*)

Walco: Rochali! Independence has brought Uncle Mukania from the country to the jubilant capital.

(*Enter Mukania, Milindi in rags, Carby, a teacher and others.*)

Rochali (*going to greet Mukania*): Father.

Mukania: Rochali, we are independent . . . free.

Rochali: Have you come from the plantation too, Milindi and Carby?

Teacher: Rochali.

Rochali: So you are here too, teacher.

Teacher: Yes, I've come to see what it's like in town after independence.

Rochali: Brother, how is everyone in the countryside?

Milindi (*indicating his clothes*): You can tell by looking at me.

Mukania: Things will improve now that we're independent.

(*Berry runs in, calling out.*)

Berry: Mother, father's back!

Milindi: Molobo's back.

(*The crowd makes way and Molobo enters.*)

Molobo: Rochali!

Rochali: Molobo! You. . . (*They embrace.*)

Molobo: I'm back. Home at last.

Rochali: After four years. You. . . How are you? (*She does not know what to say.*)

Milindi: You should be happy, Rochali, now Molobo's back.

Molobo: Our country is independent. After four years' exile I've come home to greet the dawn.

Rochali: I can hardly believe you're back, Molobo.

Mukania: It's true, Rochali. The Belgian devils hounded your poor husband out of the country, but now after four years he's home again.

Molobo: Home. The blue skies of our motherland, her golden soil, her dense jungles and my dear ones' tears of grief all called me home. And here I am.

Walco: Well, Molobo, my old schoolmate. How is it that for years you and happiness have kept out of my way?

Molobo: Walco, don't you remember what happened four years ago?

Walco: Four years ago you were expelled from school for political activities. Now I hear you are a worker.

Molobo: Assistant to a worker, an apprentice. Well, my old schoolmate, how's life treated you all these years? Are you still the same old Walco?

Walco: Me? I'm a rubber ball. So long as you don't crush me, I keep my bounce. (*Laughter.*)

Molobo: We're independent at last.

Walco: I'll change into a balloon and sail up to heaven. (*Laughter.*)

(*Martial music is heard and shouted slogans. Enter Mwanka.*)

Mwanka (*seeing Molobo*): Molobo!

Molobo: Mwanka. (*They embrace.*)

Mwanka: So you are back, Molobo?

Molobo: Yes, I've come back. What are you all up to?

Mwanka: We're parading. Father, Milindi, Rochali. Why, the whole family's here.

Mukania (*joyfully*): Independence has given you wings to fly back to me. Independence has brought our family together again. To think that I've lived to see this day, to see our true motherland.

Mwanka: Yes, so long as we're true to Lumumba, so long as we drive out that white general Ronson and get a black general, we'll. . . .

Molobo: We must be on our guard.

Mwanka: You still talk like a political refugee. Have the Belgians made a coward of you? What have we to fear now the guns are in our hands?

Molobo: It's this way. . . .

Mwanka: Arguing is none of a soldiers' business. I must be going. (*He hurries after his contingent.*)

Mukania: We don't need an African general with Lumumba to lead us. He is the Congo's salvation. Long live Lumumba!

(*They dance until a screech of brakes is heard. Tshondra leads in Gilbert, Warren and others.*)

Gilbert: Well met, my dear Congolese friends.

Tshondra: My dear compatriots, allow me to introduce our noble, respected American friend, Mr. Gilbert.

Gilbert: On behalf of the American embassy, I wish to offer our heartfelt congratulations on the rebirth of the Congo, on the Congo's independence. (*Applause.*) Is this the place? (*He indicates the mansion.*)

Tshondra: Yes. This is the residence of the former Belgian governor Lubens.

Gilbert: Fine. Who's in charge here? (*He turns to Rochali.*) You?

Rochali: No, I was just a maid here.

Gilbert: Excellent, friends.

Tshondra: The Belgians have made over this building to the United Nations authorities who are coming.

Gilbert: Mr. Hammarskjold has authorized us to take it over. I hope I can count on your co-operation. Will you take us in to have a look?

Rochali: Very well. (*She takes Tshondra, Gilbert, Warren and the others in.*)

Milindi: The United Nations? Didn't you say we were independent? What business has the United Nations here?

All: Yes, what business has the United Nations here?

Mukania: The United Nations will help us drive away the Belgian paratroopers who are trying to make a come-back. They're going to help us keep our independence.

All: That's it. They're coming to help us.

Milindi: We mustn't just rely on help from others. We must rely on ourselves.

First Youth: We're already free.

Teacher: Free? The broad masses of our people haven't yet won freedom.

Carby: We are still slaves.

All: What's that you say?

Milindi: Father, brothers, in the city you are singing and dancing to celebrate independence, but millions of Congolese living in the country are still being beaten by the plantation owners and colonialists.

All: All that's finished and done with.

Molobo: No, Milindi and Carby are talking about today.

Mukania: The wind of independence and freedom will blow from the towns to the countryside. It will blow all over the Congo.

All: That's true. We've only had eight days of independence. Don't be in such a hurry.

Mukania: With him (*indicating a picture of Lumumba*) we have freedom. He led us to resist the Belgian colonialists. If not for him we wouldn't have independence. We must do whatever Lumumba says.

(*Gilbert and his party reappear.*)

Tshondra: True, very true. We must do whatever Lumumba says.

Gilbert: That's right. We are Lumumba's good friends. I can assure you that the United Nations will help you to find happiness and freedom. (*Applause.*) We in

the United Nations sympathize deeply with the sufferings of the Congolese people under the cruel rule of Belgium. (*Applause.*) Our sacred task in coming here is to use the prestige and might of the United States — I mean the United Nations — to safeguard your independence, drive away the Belgians and wipe out colonialism. (*Applause.*) Long live Lumumba! (*All cry, "Long live Lumumba!"*) To show our friendship and unity I welcome you to join our service.

Milindi (*to Molobo*): Here is your chance.

Molobo: Is it necessary?

Milindi: Yes.

Molobo: All right. (*To Gilbert*) How about taking me?

Gilbert: This is. . . .

Rochali: He's my husband, Molobo.

Gilbert: What's your profession?

Molobo: Profession? (*He makes a show of driving a car.*)

Gilbert: A driver, eh? Excellent. Indispensable. Will you stay on with your wife and work for us?

Tshondra: It's a wonderful chance to do something for our friends and our common cause.

Molobo: Since it's for our cause, I'll do my best.

Gilbert: Seventy U.S. dollars a month. (*Animation in the crowd.*) If you want to work for us, you can sign on. That's fine. I hope we'll work hand in hand to destroy colonialism.

Milindi: Right, to destroy colonialism.

CURTAIN

SCENE 2

UNREST IN THE OASIS

One morning six months later.

In a coconut plantation in the suburbs of Leopoldville stands Mukania's wooden cabin roofed with coir. Coir palms grow beside it.

It is winter on the equator, but the sun is still blazing hot. As a sultry wind blows in gusts the palm trees droop and the coir palms on both sides rustle thirstily.

The intermittent drone of circling aircraft and the roar of planes taking off or alighting mingle with the *United Nations Song* played by a brass band to form a disturbing cacophony of sound.

Red and white wind-socks flutter in the distant airport. Shouts and the roar of machines enlarging the airfield add to the general confusion. The "peaceful oasis" seems like a volcano which may at any moment set the equator ablaze.

The curtain rises.

A G.I. chases a labourer.

G.I.: Why are you running away? You are building an airfield for the United Nations.

Conscript: I have worked for three days and three nights.

(The G.I. beats him. The conscript kicks him to ground and escapes. The G.I. fires and chases after him.)

(UN soldiers and some of Mobutu's troops are driving along a gang of conscript labourers. A woman grows faint and staggers. When another conscript puts down his heavy load to help her, a UN soldier sends him sprawling and beats him up.)

1st G.I.: Nigger! (*Before the conscript can rise the G.I. spits at him, then bellows with laughter.*)

1st Conscript: Sir, even cattle have to stop work to eat, and we're human beings. How can we work twenty-four hours on empty stomachs?

U.S. Corporal (*guffawing*): Listen, nigger. Nobody told us anything about letting you rest. You're supposed to have the guts to work round the clock, and we admire you for that. Dancing is the best way for Congolese to relax. So start dancing.

(*The 1st G.I. forces a woman to dance, and as she whirls desperately round they roar with laughter. One of the indignant conscripts intervenes and is shot dead. The others in silence start a war dance which throws the U.S. soldiers into a panic.*)

Mwanka (*entering*): What's up?

U.S. Corporal: Hullo, Mwanka.

Mwanka (*saluting*): How are you, corporal?

U.S. Corporal (*offering Mwanka his flask*): Have a drink. To our friendship, Mwanka. (*Mwanka drinks.*)
Have some more. It'll give you more sense.

Mwanka: Thank you, corporal. (*He finishes the flask.*)

U.S. Corporal: Haha. (*To the conscripts*) See that, you lousy lot? Mwanka is a real Congolese. He understands the meaning of friendship. (*To Mwanka*) Look at this lazy crew. I bet you know how to get them to quit slacking.

Mwanka: I understand.

U.S. Corporal: OK.

Mwanka: You surely don't need me to tell you, friends, how we should work for our Congo.

A Woman: Our Congo? What does the Congo need airports for?

Mwanka: So that the United Nations can send armed forces to protect us and stop the Belgians from trampling all over us.

1st Conscript: Bah, it was like this when the Belgians were here. Nothing has changed since the Yanks and the UN came. How are we to live?

Conscripts: Yes, how are we to live?

Mwanka: You? The UN's come to help us to be independent. Who's to build an airport for the UN if you won't?

1st Conscript: The UN. In the six months the UN has been here what's become of our independence?

Woman: The UN is no better than the Belgians.

Mwanka: Shut up and get back to work.

Woman: I've worked, but I can't work every day on the airfield. I've a family to feed. We're all Congolese, have a heart. How can you take the side of the foreigners?

Mwanka: What nonsense are you talking? (*He threatens her with his gun.*)

1st Conscript: Don't betray your own people.

Mwanka: What? Betray? Me? (*He tries to club the man with his gun.*)

Berry (*running in to catch Mwanka's arm*): Don't beat our own folk, uncle.

Mwanka: Out of my way! (*He knocks Berry down and rounds on the conscript.*)

Mukania (*coming in*): Mwanka! What are you doing?

Mwanka: Doing my duty, father. Get moving. (*He drives the conscripts on.*)

G.I.: Nice work!

(*The soldiers march the conscripts off.*)