

AMONG KINGS



The Amazing Adventures of the Congo's
African American Livingstone and the
Courageous People who Topped King Leopold II

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1

The Congo – 1880

The iridescent full moon reflecting on the Congo River faded against the brilliant morning sun rising in the east. Beneath the dense jungle canopy, fast hands slapped tight animal skins in a distinctive cadence. The high-pitched *ta-ta-ta-ta* interspersed with low bass notes. The drum beats rose above the hypnotizing hum of buzzing insects. The rising cries of kingfishers, guinea fowl, grey parrots, and turacos created a pleasing morning chorus.

Drum song and birdsong awakened the village. Families stepped from thatched huts into sunlight streaming through the shadows of giant trees. The red ground and jungle undergrowth, still wet with dew, gave the air a dank, heavy smell.

The unfolding beauty of dawn was in the river, jungle, sun, and sky.

Eden awakened.

The sound of beating drums startled young Shamba, jarring him awake. He jumped from his mat and leaped to the opening of his hut. He'd waited weeks for those drums. The drums invited the men from surrounding villages to a celebration hosted by Makoko, a brave hunter and respected Kuba elder.

For the past year, Shamba had endured intense physical training and preparation, learning the ways of his tribe. Tonight would be everything his warrior training had prepared him for. Tonight, Shamba would become a man. *A Kuba warrior.*

Shamba ran a hand along the intricate pattern of raised bumps and dots on his dark chest. The wounds had healed, leaving behind

coveted scars. The *odouti*, the scar master, had thrown broken cowrie shells into a pot of water to determine this particular pattern. He then took a sharp coconut shell to Shamba's skin. The process had been painful and tedious, but the final result was stunning.

Shamba had yet to grow strong chest muscles like his father's. The elders assured him as the son of Makoko, he would become a fine warrior. He had demonstrated his strength and skill in wrestling matches, spear throwing, bow hunting, and running races. Tonight, his father would confirm his identity and place in the tribe. The spirits of his ancestors would honor the sacred warrior marks on his arm.

Shamba spent the day isolated, alone with his thoughts and visions, fasting in preparation. All he wore was a small loincloth with a leather belt and sheathed knife. As evening neared, he heard sounds of men arriving, gathering and greeting one another. They passed large gourds filled with palm wine. The village musicians began singing ancestral songs in high voices. The music rose louder as more men arrived.

Finally, two warriors came for Shamba. They led him to a blazing fire surrounded by dozens of men. The muscled warriors stood there dressed in the ceremonial clothing of raffia cloth, leopard skins, fetish necklaces, spears, curved knives, and war axes. Several witch doctors wore elaborate headdresses of long feathers and colored glass beads.

Shamba's father and the village chief stepped in front of Shamba. His father held a spear with a long metal tip. The chief carried an ornately carved ceremonial knife. The chief then spoke to Shamba about the duties and responsibilities of a Kuba warrior. Someday, he would take a wife and confer upon his sons the traditions of the tribe.

The chief gripped Shamba's shoulder. "The mark of your Kuba ancestors," he said, dragging the knife across Shamba's shoulder.

Shamba clenched his teeth as crimson blood flowed from the three-inch slice. He refused to flinch, as still as the village totem. The chief took a handful of charcoal powder and pressed it into the wound.

Again, the chief set the knife against Shamba's shoulder. "The mark of your village!"

He dug the blade dug deep. Shamba felt heat flash through his body. With effort, he absorbed the pain into his body. His feet didn't move. He steeled himself for the third and final mark. Then he could relax and feast on the young goat roasting nearby.

After the chief packed more charcoal into the second cut, he stepped aside to Shamba's surprise. His father came forward and pressed his head against Shamba's in the same way he did on the day of his birth.

"Shamba," Makoko said. "Go now, my son. Kill the leopard. When you return, I will give you the final mark of a Kuba warrior."

This last instruction had been a long-held secret among Kuba warriors. Every young boy, to become a man, had to hunt a leopard. Boys practiced by killing birds, warthogs, boars, monkeys — even driving a spear through the heads of smaller crocodiles sleeping among the reeds at the river's edge.

Killing a leopard required uncommon skill and accuracy. Though beautiful, leopards were the enemy of the tribe. Always lurking and preying upon unsuspecting villagers. To receive the final warrior mark, the best young Kuba hunters returned before the morning light.

Makoko thrust his spear at Shamba. Shamba took it and ran. A moment's pause would be seen as weakness, or worse, disrespect. He tore out of the village to the sound of cheering men and pounding drums. Into the shadows of the night, his feet took him fast down familiar paths.

Shamba knew precisely where he wanted to go: a shallow moon-streaked stream where he and his friends often went to watch female leopards bring their young to drink. Shamba ran past large palms, and giant ferns as the sounds of celebration faded in the distance. He felt strong and swift. Energized by visions of his first leopard kill, his shoulder felt no pain. Bounding over rocks and roots, his feet carried him deeper and deeper into the jungle.



Shamba held his spear fast as he raced past a cluster of towering mahogany trees when he caught a glimpse of two sets of darting eyes from the bush. He stopped short, breathing shallowly, hoping not to be seen. Two bearded men in sweat-stained khakis with rifles stepped onto the hardened path. Mzungus. *White men*. A tall, dark figure holding a bow and a war ax followed. This was M'lumba N'kusa, one of the many chiefs among the feared Zappo Zaps.

Nsapu Nsapu, the leader of the Zappo Zaps, ruled in the Ben'Eki kingdom in the eastern Kasai region of Congo. Given the name "Zappo Zap" by a white explorer, Nsapu Nsapu directed notorious slave raiding attacks on villages. Tonight, M'lumba would lead the charge.

M'lumba's tattooed face and the sharp points of razor-filed teeth gave him a repulsive look. He waved his ax and motioned with a firm hand signal. From the cover of the night, hundreds of warriors stepped on the path and into a small clearing. They gathered around their leader and the white men.

N'kusa pointed toward the drumsong coming from the Kuba camp, then singled out a warrior and pointed toward Shamba. The command was clear: *Kill the boy*. Shamba saw the signal and darted away. N'kusa then waved his men onward as the mercenaries hung back, lit cigarettes, and waited.



In the village, the celebration continued as the men awaited Shamba's return. They could be waiting for hours, but Makoko had prepared well. Shamba's mother and the village women served large bowls of spiced millet, taro, manioc, corn, cassava, and rice. The men ate generous portions of roasted goat, chicken and springbok. After the meat, the men eagerly reached into baskets of fried grasshoppers, crickets, dung beetles, and termites. And more palm wine.

Makoko stood with his friends at the fire and thanked those who traveled for tonight's celebration. Silently, he prayed for a successful hunt for his son. How proud he would be when Shamba returned with the slain leopard around his shoulders!

A gourd made its way around the fire. Makoko took it and drank deep. As the cool liquid ran down his throat, he felt the dizzying effects of all the alcohol consumed. When he lowered the gourd, a sharp burning sensation pierced his throat from behind. Makoko choked, unable to inhale. A torrent of blood rushed in his mouth. The gourd fell to the ground. The campfire blurred. The last thing Makoko saw before journeying to the land of his ancestors was the long shaft of a metal-tipped arrow sticking through his neck.

A sudden volley of arrows rained down upon the Kuba celebration. From the cover of darkness, long spears zipped through the air, impaling the assembled Kuba warriors. Cries rang out and bodies fell as mortal wounds struck those gathered around the fire.

With the whole village encircled, the Zappo Zaps let out loud war cries and moved in for their second wave of attack.

When he heard the screams, Shamba stopped running. He ducked near a moss-covered tree and listened closely, willing the sound of his own beating heart to quiet. Kuba men were shouting a desperate call to arms. The Zappo Zap war cries were clear and unmistakable. From his perch high on the hill, he watched as fire raced through his village. Paralyzed, he heard the screams of women — his mother and sisters. Of every family he'd ever known.

Within minutes, the blood-curling cries grew dim. A few final, frantic pleas rose in the night air. Screams for mercy. Offers of forced servitude. Soon, the Zappo Zaps extinguished all sounds of life in Shamba's village like the final beat of a drum.

Thwack!

A battle ax quivered in the tree inches from Shamba's head. A Zappo Zap warrior was charging up the path. Shamba ducked into a small opening in the thick undergrowth. He scrambled on all fours — rat-like — over vines and roots through a dark, tight labyrinth. He crawled further into the tangle of gnarled branches. The space was confining like the tightly woven bamboo traps his father wove to catch fish. Shamba held his spear tight and tried to move without making a sound. The rigid spear caught on the branches, making it challenging to navigate the dark, unfamiliar surroundings.

All at once, the long blade of a spear punched through the undergrowth. It narrowly missed his slender arm. Shamba scooted forward, reaching for any root he could find. The spear pierced through the brush from all sides. Shamba couldn't see his attacker's position, but he heard grunting and shuffling feet. From every direction, the warrior jammed his spear like a needle piercing leather.

Jab-pull! Jab-pull!

Shamba stopped and listened carefully. Had the warrior given up and left? He inched forward. A narrow opening lay ahead. He could just make out the dim glow of moonlight falling on distant trees. Quietly he slid his spear next to his side and crawled towards it. He knew he couldn't exit and pull out his spear at the same time. Rushing out of the opening, he landed on both feet in a fighting stance. Knife ready.

Shamba flashed the knife to his left and right. In an instant, he saw the warrior crouched low, almost camouflaged under a large tree with a ray of moonlight streaked across his shoulder. His bow was drawn with a long arrow, ready to strike. The Zappo Zap warrior cracked a wicked smile, revealing sharp teeth like daggers.

Shamba felt fear set in like the witch doctor's dark poison.

The warrior was toying with him. If he were going to take his shot, he would have already launched his arrow. It didn't matter if Shamba dodged left or right; the Zappo Zap had him in his sights. At the moment, Shamba considered no longer himself or the arrow about to pierce his heart. He thought only of his father, mother, and sisters. He prayed the spirits would unite his family in the afterlife. He then prayed for a brave warrior to rise to avenge his family and the destruction of his village.

A loud, sinister hiss broke the silence. Then a thick branch crashed down on the warrior. Jaws wide open, the python latched onto the warrior's neck. Its massive body followed, dropping down and knocking him to the ground.

The warrior screamed in agony as the python went to work. It wrapped its heavy coils around the warrior's legs and then, his midsection. It rolled him, the pulsating coils heaving and twisting, administering a slow but sure death by strangulation.

Shamba reached back into the thatched opening and pulled out his spear. He sheathed his knife and headed back down the path.



The mercenaries walked among bloodied corpses, smoking to kill time as the Zappo Zaps pilfered the village. The moon shone ashen grey on the burnt-out remains of skeletal huts and storehouses. The charred bamboo rafters gave off a pungent scent through spinning wisps of smoke carried by the breeze.

One mercenary lazily kicked overturned baskets as the other flung shards of broken pottery. They argued and debated as they strolled towards the center of the village: Could the Monarchy of Belgium ever become as great as Britain? Why had the king chosen the bloody Congo? A cursed land teeming with sleeping sickness and suffocating heat. The swamps and malarial mosquitos. The incessant thrum of the jungle. All of the unseen and lurking dangers stalking them in the dark.

Silently they wondered, each in his own way, what value the Zappo Zaps saw in the bounty? What special trinket or fetish?

There was no gold. No silver. No precious gemstones. This God-forsaken hellhole offered nothing they desired. Their only consolation was the generous wages awaiting them upon their return home. A handsome sum. More liquor and women. Now there's a bounty.

When they arrived at a smoldering fire where a goat was roasting on a spit, they threw wood on the coals and passed a flask. When the flames licked higher, one of the men reached into his pocket and pulled out a small silver case. He opened it. Took out two cigarettes. Put both in his mouth. He squatted, reached for a burning stick, then ignited both with a couple puffs. He handed one to his comrade, then stood and offered his political take. King Leopold II was chasing his cousin's bustle. England had been snatching country after country for a long time. On the world's stage, Leopold had a lot of catching up to do.

The other took a deep drag on his cigarette and said in French, "Por roi et pays."

For king and country.

The second spat and replied in English, "Screw Britain."



From a ridgeline above his village, Shamba stayed hunkered in the bush until all the Zappo Zaps had left. The morning sun was still low on the horizon, but the vultures were already circling. The jackals would also soon arrive. He'd need to act quickly to honor his family by giving them a proper burial. The weight on his shoulders was almost more than he could bear. But he pushed forward. Shamba was sure his father could see him from the spirit world. He'd make his father proud.

When Shamba arrived, his village was almost unrecognizable. Acrid smoke swirled from the smoldering ruins. It stung his eyes and tasted so sharp it burned the back of his throat. Among the ashes, he heard the echoes of last night's beating of drums and stamping feet on the hard-red ground. He saw the men drinking palm wine while smiling women served meat from platters. He saw his sisters laughing and his mother's smile.

Now, Shamba's mother and sisters lay huddled at his feet, their bloodied bodies one atop the other. His heart was pierced straight through. The fresh cuts on his shoulder still stung, but how much greater the pain in his heart!

Shamba returned to the fire ring where hours before he had stood among the cheering men. There he found his father's body;

an arrow lodged in his throat. Shamba made a solemn vow. He swore vengeance for the slaughter of his father, his family, and village. His heart would not rest until his enemies lay dead at his feet.

Shamba heaved the leopard off his shoulders. *Whump!*

The elusive predator landed next to his father. Its golden fur and black spots were treasured throughout the land, especially by the chiefs and witch doctors. He had hoped to give it as a gift to his father. His prized kill was the only beauty in the ransacked and charred village.

Shamba gathered kindling and threw it on the coals. He must eat quickly. Bury his family. Elude the Zappo Zap patrols. Though his father was no longer among the living to give him his final warrior mark, Shamba knew what to do.

He unsheathed his knife and began to skin the leopard.

He would wear its skin and take on its spirit.

To fulfill his vow, Shamba would become the leopard.