

# Bamanya: Books in the Jungle



Honoré Vinck

Portrait by Ingrid Bouws

Mbandaka is the centre of the world, if you stand in front of a world map and draw a diagonal cross. It is where Henry Morton Stanley founded an 'outpost of progress': Equator Station, the beginning of the history of this small town on the equator. Nowadays Mbandaka is one of the biggest towns in Congo, with an estimated population of 100.000-150.000 inhabitants. Located on the river Congo, it is a poor town, with little or no industry.

Traces of '*l'époque coloniale*' can be found in the town centre. Along wide streets stand beautiful houses, or their remains, where the colonials once lived. Thirty years of decay have not left much intact. Mbandaka is the capital of the province of Equateur. The region is looked upon with some condescendence by the rest of Congo: it is the land of hunters and fishermen.

The mission village Bamanya is located ten kilometres outside of Mbandaka. The sandy road that leads there is paved with gaps and holes, many of them filled with yellowish water.

On the first morning of my stay there, the sound of jubilation wakes me up. Some two hundred children's voices singing make the best alarm ever. Once a week the children of the mission school walk to a village nearby, singing the whole journey. It is six thirty. I take a cold shower and when I get dressed, sweat is running down my face.

## *Annales Aequatoria*

The one hundred and fifty subscribers of *Annales Aequatoria* must be patient a little longer. The aluminum plates for the printers in Kinshasa have been waiting for clearance in the port of Matadi (Congo's main port) for months. It is just one of the many problems you encounter when trying to undertake anything in this country. Setbacks are met with a '*C'est L'Afrique*' and, well yes, it is.

Centre Aequatoria, Centre de Recherches Culturelles Africanistes, publishes the

yearbook *Annales Aequatoria*. The Centre Aequatoria is part of the mission post and has a library of over 10.000 books and extensive archives. The books mainly focus on the history of Congo, with an emphasis on local history, and on African languages. The language of the region, Lomongo, occupies a special place. The archives consist in unique materials on the history of the region and the mission post.

The climate has surprisingly slight effect on the condition of the books. The most dangerous enemies come crawling from outside: termites.

The collection of the Centre Aequatoria library is incomplete. It is no miracle that important books are missing, considering the annual budget for books and magazines is around 1000 euros. Furthermore considering other obstacles - no mailmen in Congo, only 3 hours of electricity a day at the mission, and no modern means of communication - it is a miracle that the library still exists and is maintained.



Library Aequatoria - Bamanya

A library is an oasis of calm and culture. If you sit reading surrounded by thousands of books, it does not matter where in the world you are. You are always at home.

Aequatoria is an oasis to Prof. dr. Motingea Mangulu. He has his own room in the guesthouse, with his books and a computer. Prof Mangulu received his title with a study on Ngiri-languages in Leiden, 1996. He lived there for a year and a half. *'Aequatoria is the only place where I can work. Not only because of the library, but because of the peace and quiet.'* My question whether it is hard to work here, after spending nearly two years in an academic environment of endless possibilities, is met with a melancholic smile. *'That is difficult. It is different here. Here you have to survive.'* I don't ask, but know that the average income of a professor in Congo is little under the price of a crate of beer. *'You don't compare'*, says Professor Mangulu. *'I have to work here now with these possibilities. And I*

*am glad to have this place. I can work here. I can have discussions with Father Vinck. And I get intellectual stimulation.'*

Father Honoré Vinck (1941), member of the Congregation of Missionaries of the Sacred Heart, is the director of the Centre Aequatoria. Dreamer and activist, Flemish nationalist and citizen of the world, modest and dominant, solitary and a people's person, eloquent and silent, an ascetic with a glass of beer in his hand.

One morning while musing over the small graveyard, I hear behind me: *'I love to dream. A person has to dream. Otherwise you don't make plans. And you have to make plans before being able to accomplish them. When I start doing that, nobody and nothing is going to stop me. That is my nature.'*

After finishing secondary education Honoré Vinck studied theology and philosophy. At the end of the nineteen fifties the church was still traditional and devout. He still holds his classical education in great esteem. In the first two years he was introduced to Aristotelian philosophy, which provided him with the tools to think for himself, and create his own worldview. Above all, his study time in Belgium brought many pleasures. Whether it was science or literature, Vinck devoured everything. He specialized in church history, and especially liturgy. Meanwhile the church started changing in the sixties, and after his studies Vinck moved to Paris for a degree in theology.

*May 68*

One morning Vinck rides the subway to read mass to the sisters near the Unesco-building. *'Révolution'* is written on a wall in thick letters. It is May '68.

*'That has been a crucial experience in my life. My political thinking has been shaped by it, in many ways. How does power relate to the people, to society? How do ideologies relate to society? It is no small thing. There you saw the enormous power of thought, of thinking. The power of pressure groups. The miracle of idealism.'*

Everything must end, and the revolution is no exception. Honoré Vinck receives his degree and heads for Congo. He lands in Mbandaka in February 1972. After his arrival in Bamanya he gets three months to learn the local language, Lomongo, taught by Father Gustaaf Hulstaert.



I had already noticed them in Mbandaka: men and women wearing fabrics with Father Hulstaert's picture. *'Nkumu ea Mongo'* (the nobleman of Mongo), *'Bondjea W'elemo'* (knower of everything), is the message. Some lives will not fit into a single paragraph. Father Hulstaert (1900-1990) is the founder of Aequatoria, and started recording Lomongo in the thirties, and became an authority in bantuistics. In 1937 Hulstaert was co-founder of Aequatoria, an influential magazine in the Belgian colonies, which ceased existing in 1963.

Honoré Vinck discovers Hulstaert's library when he is put in charge of the mission post in Bamanya, after working as a traveling father for years. Once acquainted with the books, he finds a new vocation. Vinck dreams and starts making plans, and finds a lot of scepticism on his way - from Hulstaert, but even more from the order. But Vinck is not to be deterred, and in 1982 publishes a Festschrift, the first copy of Aequatoria in its new shape. That year he also tours Europe in search of people to support his plans. Vinck pitches the idea to expand the library and move it, preferably nearer to Mbandaka. But alas, the order nixes the plan. *'My plans met a lot of resistance, nobody believed in them. I searched for money and finally a German order donated 100.000 DM. The money helped built the library and guesthouse.'*

## Scriptoria



What keeps Vinck going is his love of books, and passion for his work. *'I see Aequatoria as a church service. There is a strong tradition within the church, represented by the Jesuits and other groups, that allows for marginal thinking. During the Middle Ages the church kept scriptoria in her bigger convents. They are the ones who spread classical culture by preserving it and copying manuscripts. I look at Aequatoria as a scriptorium, in that sense of the word. It is my private vocation to keep this open. Even if not fully functioning.'* The goal of Annales Aequatoria is quite simple: to record, publish and preserve dialects and historic documents, without discussions or grand theories.

The library and the guesthouse are situated in an idyllic spot. The rural tranquillity is only disturbed by the sound of birds, which continues all day.

Yesterday morning I noticed Vinck walking over to the rose bushes and watched him cautiously cut a few roses and smell them. Now they stand in a small vase, spreading a soft, sweet smell.

But there is always a flipside. Three years ago the mission post was attacked. There was shooting, and the sisters house was plundered. Vinck spent fearful hours hiding in the woods, together with his secretary. Last year the mission had to be abandoned when Mobutu's reign was coming to an end. The mission was left unguarded for some months. On return everything appeared to be intact, although there was a lot of damage. The local people had buried everything underground. Every machine, many papers, everything they thought to be valuable.

I ask him if his surroundings still think of Vincks work as slightly useless, and whether that is a threat to his work. *'It has become clear to our confrères from Congo that the Centre Aequatoria is one of the few good things in this field, in this country. It has become a prestige project. They are the first to defend us.'* But obstacles remain, and of much the same nature as the one Father Hulstaert ran into.

The last evening of my stay we sit at the table, beer in front of us, and I ask Vinck if he is content with his work in Centre Aequatoria. *'Considering the problems we had, yes, definitely. Of course I would want things to be ten times better. My wish would be one million dollars.'* Then what? Vinck smiles, but recites a wish list without hesitation. Books, many books and magazines would be bought. And a computer. *'Then we would go online with our own homepage. I'd double the income of my staff. And I would organise summer schools, at least twice a year, for 14 days. For the mission I would buy a new car, and for myself a new bike.'*

Reveries of a solitary walker, or profession of faith of a Savoyard vicar?

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February 1998

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## **Epilogue**

*January 2011*

12,5 years have passed since I visited the library in Bamanya. Father dr. Honoré Vinck (MSC) has been living in Flanders for years now, but the library still exists. It is open for business three days a week. The future of Centre Aequatoria is uncertain, but that goes for many things in Congo.

The last issue of Annales Aequatoria has been published in January 2011 and with it Honoré Vinck ends a chapter of his working life.

As a tribute to his work RQ republishes this story about his Centre Aequatoria.