

# To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Education, Solidarity And Being Able To Say No. Interview With Matthew Essieh



Matt Essieh is my name, born in Sampa which is a village on the border with Ivory Coast. I loved school but had to stop at age twelve after completing middle school. My parents were very poor, even so that I had to live as an altar boy at the Catholic mission. My parent's house was literally too small for all their children and you know that we Africans can improvise! So I grew up at the mission. After middle school I went across the border into Ivory Coast and stayed with an aunt. It was my own idea and the only way I knew to find money to further my education for which I have a passion. Yes so my plan was to do odd jobs and so raise enough money to support myself through secondary school. I decided on moving over the border into another country because in those days the economy over there was better. It was for example possible to earn money delivering loads at the local market with your wheel barrel and I also sold ice-cream with one of these bicycles with a cold box up front. I was willing to do everything. I cleaned tables in one of the hotels and many other 'by-day' jobs, whatever I could find.

This hotel had a restaurant where many of the Peace Corps volunteers used to come and have a drink after their work. The French language is hard for the Americans and I spoke English with them. Two Peace Corps volunteers took a special interest in me. They were maybe 21 years old and I was then 15. They really wanted to help me go through high school. So with the money I earned over these three years in Ivory Coast, and with their help, I found admission at secondary school in Brong Ahafo in Ghana. I was a little tiny skinny kid at that time so I looked as young as the other students. These volunteers helped me so much because they paid most of the tuition fees. I almost finished secondary school but during my last year one of the volunteers died. She had leukemia and died in Washington DC. I heard later that before this girl died she asked her

parents to please look after 'the boy in Ghana'. They then took such an interest in me that they helped me go to college in the States. I went to Oregon, Southern State Oregon University. When I left Ghana and entered college in The States I was probably 20 or 21.

Oregon is beautiful and quiet. It was the perfect place for me coming from a small rural town in Ghana. The atmosphere is nice that's why I was specially grateful to be able to attend college over there on the West Coast. I graduated in computer business and then also got a Masters Degree in business studies.

Of course when you grow up here in Ghana you never forget your family. You feel strongly that you need to help your own country. So I studied hard and worked hard and was quite successful in both. I sought to get jobs which enabled me to best help my family in Ghana, like other Ghanaians do to their family.

My first job was at the computer department of a bank. I worked there for four or five years in software and accounting. In the meantime I had been in the States for over seven years and had never spoken my own language again. There was nobody from Ghana in my area and I felt cut off. I speak Twi. There were Nigerians and people from Sierra Leone but I did not get to speak my own language. There were no telephones, cell phones and all that in Ghana at that time.

So I really felt homesick and in 1985 returned for the first time to my country and my family. It took me a week to get the feel for my language again and that was a very strange experience. When I came back I saw my mother and my brothers and sisters, their young children and all the extended family. I wanted to help them all. It baffled me. I just had this little job which I was doing and how could I have enough money to support my family and extended family and the whole town?

So I went back to the States. I started thinking a lot about my obligation to help. I can only help if I have something! That inspired me to start my own business because working for somebody else limits you. In the USA, while I did not encounter racism, it was still hard to break into the system as somebody from the outside, particularly as an African. I decided therefore to start my own software consulting business. In the computer and software field there is a market and when you know what you are doing color does not play a role anymore. Besides computer science is really my branch.

I created my own website for the company and soon received clients from all over the world. From the Netherlands and England and of course from inside the USA.

From many other countries as well, so much so that I was baffled by my own success.

I provide software for financial institutions. We now have our own building, a large facility in Portland, and we support several customers in Chicago and in the New York area and even in the Southern part of the country. I am the primary owner and have a large staff of employees and engineers. The business is important but more important is what I do with the funds. I had started my business with the sole aim to help my people in Ghana. There was a reason for this business beyond just becoming successful. Eventually I decided to set up a foundation with my family. My wife is a beautiful lady from Nigeria and I also have three kids. My son is now 17 years old. He is also here in Ghana at the moment, spending his summer vacation in Sampa.

So I have set up a non-for-profit foundation with the profits of the company. I use it for example to support our kids from Sampa in their education, and also to help children of Ghanaians who come to the States. I make it a point to see that they get quality education instead of just doing day to day jobs here and there. Good education sets them off right in life and gives them a foundation to prosper. Right now we're supporting one youngster who just completed his Bachelor's degree. He is working at Intel. Another is in Canada where he just received a Masters degree and we are also helping two other students. So I primarily assist young talented Ghanaians with good education and if they succeed in America they hopefully think about the people they left behind in Ghana.

At the minimum they will help their own family and hopefully more than that. We don't expect from the Ghanaian kids in the USA that they repay their school-fees to our foundation but what we expect from them is that they study seriously, graduate, find a good job and help their homeland. Well right now they don't pay us back, I may change that in the future.

Our foundation also helps with some projects in Sampa. We use some of the funds to help with medical supplies and do fundraising to construct a dormitory for girls at Sampa's secondary school. That's why I am in Ghana now, to see how the construction of the dormitory is going. It goes well. My son stays on to help while I have to return to the States.

You could say that I run a development agency for my town Sampa in Ghana and for good education of Ghanaian children in the States. That was the cause, the reason for starting my now well known software business. I have to say that

always and always keeping that goal in mind was one of the reasons that I succeeded. To work just for money is sometimes empty. I make profit for a cause. There is a motive for the profit beyond myself and my family and I have seen that that is a satisfactory way of living in all kind of ways.

Of course there are difficulties in running a business, all kind of problems. It is however a fact that they change into light burdens if you know that the aim of it all is to help people! It gives the energy to go on when it becomes hard.

The problems in Africa can be so overwhelming that you just throw your hands in the air! However if you develop your talent well and you get friends and family to help, then you can do miracles for others even beyond your immediate family. That is what we emphasize in our foundation and to the students who we sponsor: 'Have a heart for service to others!'

Well I've visited all the families of the kids in the States that we helped through their education. They have shown dedication to their family in Ghana so that side of the equation has happened. We have a fundraiser for this girl's dormitory at Sampa and many have come to help, so at that level too it works. But it could work better still. What I am talking about, structural help, is more difficult because the outcome is a long term effect, you can't see it immediately. Mostly our people want to help relatives, not an infrastructure for the village.

What we do therefore is select the students who we sponsor. We have to make decisions. It is very difficult to get an insight in people when they come for an interview. They come in, they have a name and they want education and pretend they are going to help. How to select the genuine and generous talents! So what I do is ask the community more information about the child and so get more of a background picture. There are people I believe in.

There are people I turn down because we have limited resources and we can't waste them. My own money and even more importantly the money of the foundation can build a house for someone, things like that. I don't do that, I want development at a larger scale. Yes I have built a house for my old mother of course but beyond that it stops and we work for the community. My wife is member of the foundation and my son will be part of it as soon as he is 21.

We have to get our own children involved. My wife is very supportive while she is not even from Sampa, my wife is from Lagos in Nigeria. Yet she went to Sampa and she helps the foundation with all her heart. We also raise funds at the school of my children. So the project is under way in Sampa and as far as getting my

family involved and making them part of the process I am pleased. My son decided on his own to come to Ghana. He never made locks before and now he is making locks and works with his hands at the construction site and he is happy. I have a 15 year old girl who likes what girls of that age like, so for her I have to be careful not to push it. I want to make them aware and then the choice is theirs. I have an 8 year old girl and she has a caring side.

My business has been in place for 17 years. We have never laid off people, we consider them as extended family. In 2000 when the economy and technology in the USA went down I kept my people. I told them: you can feed your family, pay your mortgages and pay your rent. We don't lay you off. Because of this they are loyal; we have many employees who have worked over 10 years with me. Our employees are mostly Americans, mostly Anglo's, also a few Koreans and some Africans. We have diversity and we are able to work together. Sometimes I am surprised with our customers who are mostly from the South where they are not so open to blacks. They love us there because we produce quality and provide customer satisfaction which seems to make color fade away! We don't have problems getting contracts in the South, Alabama, Atlanta, etc. We do what we promise we are honest and our values transcend race and nationality.

We have had competition come and go, it is not easy to run a business with customers all over the nation and it is not easy to turn a profit while we have to keep the employees comply with all the laws and get new products. Our employees know about our fundraising but I don't force it. If someone wants to donate that is a private issue.

I think my old environment, I mean growing up in Sampa with the extended family which is so dependent on each other and the atmosphere at the mission-church has formed me and I have been very lucky. It was natural to help at the family's farm from as early onwards as I can remember, all our brothers and sisters did the same. My mother, grandmother and uncles instilled staunch values in us, of which education is one and solidarity another. That dear Peace-corps family helped me so much. My mother is Catholic, my dad too. But I have some aunts who are Muslims and that gave me the vision that we are all one. When I went to school the Muslim kids did not have a school and some of them were my best friends. I would go to Mass and they would say their own prayers.

Each time over and over again when I return to Sampa I have the same problems that each Ghanaian faces coming back home to Ghana. Everybody wants help and

you have to say 'no'. It remains difficult. I'm a top manager as they call it and still I find it hard to say no for it hurts and it keeps hurting. I've learned that it hurts more if you don't say no when you have to. My mother must be in her early seventies. You know African families, after I left she got still more kids. My parents did not marry. I see all of my family as my brothers and sisters. I am very proud of my brothers who have a building material corporation in Sampa. When I come I encourage them to stay in the same town. There is more profit in larger towns. It remains overwhelming and all I want is to make the greatest contributions I can. If I have the money and somebody really needs help I help him. I can help people with computer education. Some people may complain that I give to some an education and not to others but I can only take people who can be effective managers. I have to make decisions. Not everybody knows how to manage money. With money you can help someone but then the money is gone! Therefore I really want to help the community even if someone is going to be angry about it. You can't make everybody happy so I make those decisions. In my case I have been lucky and blessed. I have been successful so I have the resources. Some of my colleagues in the States have a job and a salary but maybe not that much. They have all that extended family back home with all their expenses and that is why they do not sometimes come back to Ghana, because the problems are so overwhelming.

In my case because of the foundation and the way I know to say either yes or no we succeed. I try to come back every other year and if I don't make it my wife and my kids come. I try to bring the kids so they can see and compare and make their own decisions. My son when he first got here said he saw everyone sitting around a fire and talking and laughing. In the States everyone gets in the room and watches TV. He liked it here. On the compound he would play with his cousins and the nieces.

Will we or the children come back to live here when we are old? I think you have to realize not everybody has the same idea about building a house here after living in the States for over 30 years. And I don't know how it feels when I have reached that age!

What is sure is that I will come and spend time here and will go back and forth. I am now in two worlds and now we have all the communications we want to reduce the gap. I can take the phone and be there by plane within 24 hours. It's accessible in all kind of ways. But who knows in time I may decide to come back

and stay here. The most important thing in my view is being connected with the place where I grew up. My children live in two worlds too and they say they are more American than African. Myself I will always be an African and hopefully through me and my extended family they can at least know their roots and acquire the knowledge that they are part of one world and that service to men, in this case Ghana, is a noble pursuit.

If I had stayed in Ghana I would have gathered money to invest, starting small and then extending gradually. Education is key, however now in Ghana the rural schools are plainly bad. They should be improved.

We should export services instead of products. The key to success in Africa is in the service industry. We must be able to export our services and knowledge just as the Koreans and other Asians do. The Indians set a great example with their service businesses which knows of no borders! They have developed a niche with their ability to prepare tax-returns for citizens of other countries, mostly for the USA. Here in Ghana we could do that too. Maybe if and when, who knows, I would retire here.

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## **To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ Caught Between Two Worlds. Interview With Samuel Oteng**



Samuel Oteng is the name. In 1987 I went to Austria. After a few years I got the papers ready and my wife came to join me where I live, a small town called Graz. Our children were born in Austria. Two, a boy and a girl, both go to school. As a family we are settled in Graz and have no intention to move away, moving now would hurt my children's education and their social life with their friends. My son Godfred, who is twelve, attends what they call the 'Gymnasium' over there and my girl Precious, who is eight, is at the primary

school. Precious says she likes where she lives and she has a gang of white girlfriends with whom she feels free and happy. She also loves nature. Our part of the country is beautiful and she does not want to move to a big city. I am the same in that way, I love the natural beauty of where we live. No, we won't move.

Also, after all, I have my work and I'm much involved in the community. Specially our church. Apart from what I said about the children and their education I have been working in that factory all my years and I do not want to lose the benefits and start all over again in London. But otherwise, yes, sometimes we dream of moving to England!

The problem is that most of our Ghanaian friends move away from Austria to the UK. As soon as they have their Austrian passport you see them going, one by one. All the time we lose more friends. It is true that living circumstances for Africans are much better in England as compared to, especially, Austria. In Austria black people are isolated because Austrians stay away from us. It makes life difficult that way. People in England are used to Africans and all kind of other nationalities and they are friendly. Of course the language too plays a role. That's why my people leave.

As I said I am not going to go to England like my friends. They challenge me: 'you are an Austrian citizen and so you can freely move to anywhere in Europe'. But no, we stay in Graz.

What I don't like is being the eternal outsider. The work also is hard. I get up early come back late, hardly see my children, my wife works too, so hardly see her at all. And now we face this exodus of Ghanaian friends leaving for Britain. Others are talking about it, some are packing. We stay where we are but it is sad to stay back here alone.

Do you think I could get a job as a bus-driver in Austria? Or any job where you get in touch with other people? No. Not in Austria and especially not in Graz where we live. I tell you, in the beginning people were afraid of me. When I would board a bus for example all other passengers would look at me. I sit in the front, they all move to the back. If I sit at the back they quietly stay in the front of the bus. All the same that was eighteen years ago and things are changing. When I came I was the only African in town and people would always look at me and sometimes point: 'Schwartz', which means 'black-man' and I would just feel bad. Anyway I was lucky because I got a job. I still have that same job after more than 15 years. I work in a factory and there at my workplace I feel at home and they like and



respect me there.

As soon as I came to Austria I wanted to be one with the people and I quickly learned their language. Not just German, but their particular dialect and way of saying things. I use certain sayings the way they do and it surprises them and it amuses them too! I felt that if I learned the language they would accept me which in a way was true. Now there are more Africans working in the factory and I am often asked to be a middle man, to translate and settle disputes. So in the work area I am all right and I know I am appreciated which is important for me.

When I came things were extremely hard as I said. Some people really had never seen a black man and one woman asked if her child could touch my skin and then she gave me money. I did not like getting money for that!! Many times you would walk on the street and people would give you money for they think that all blacks are poor and beggars because the TV always shows Africa in a bad light.

But I learned the language and I learned it well so that I speak it like a man from that village. And with my work I have no problem at all. And I believe I want to stay at that place till I get pensioned and then I have something for the future too.

Blacks now have a bad name which is partly understandable. The Nigerians sell drugs because they have no patience to wait for a work-permit and basically they don't like to work. Waiting for a work-permit can take a long time. During that time they feed you and you get some pocket money so there is no need to become impatient. However the Nigerians spoil it for us blacks, so now when they see a black they say 'Ah, a drug-dealer'.

When you have your work-permit it is still hard to get a job. As soon as they see your face they say no, this job is not for you, or no, we cannot have a black man for the job. When I later showed my passport to show that I am an Austrian they just laugh me in the face, not even understanding how they insult me. They say no, we need a real one, a real Austrian! Also you cannot get a room to rent, it is impossible. As soon as they see you the room is no more available. That's life for us in that village.

I am a religious man. My religion has helped me, my church, my wife, my family. I worked hard to build a church in Graz. It is a Pentecostal church and I worked together with an Austrian Pentecostal pastor. Then gradually the pastor became worried because by and by there were more Africans worshipping there than white people. He did not like that. I had put much of my energy in building up the

church and I lived in a room on the second floor.

When the Austrians did not want the blacks anymore they told me to move out. I negotiated meetings and we reconciled. What we decided was that the whites would have a certain time to worship and the blacks another time. It never worked. I understand we have certain habits that they despise. We decided not to be loud for we are always loud, for example. Still eventually I lost my room in that church and had to look for a house. I moved out of there but I still worship in my church and often translate for the pastor from German into English. In the church I was always the middle man between the blacks and the whites, they needed me that way. I understand the mentality of Africa but came to understand the people of that part of Austria too. Often they would call me to solve conflicts. You see so in a way I really belong there although I belong to Ghana.

Because I had a work-permit and a passport I was entitled to subsidized housing. But I tell you it was very, very hard to get a house. When you get a room then all that live in that neighborhood want to leave or they harass you till you move out again. Anyway now I have a house, I have my own apartment.

I often come to Ghana, every year if I can. I always send money and for my parents I have built a large house here in town. During my last visit they asked me for a big truck to use as a commercial vehicle. I consented but did not have such money in Austria and decided to borrow money towards purchasing the truck. I made a loan. Up to now I was not capable to repay the loan. My father said to me all the income from the car is for you to repay your loan. Then afterwards we will generate money for our family here in Ghana. I had to borrow 10,000 euro and still I am in debt.

When last year I came to Ghana and I saw that my father was driving the car or has someone driving it, I asked how much money did you make? He avoided an answer but finally I understood there was not a penny saved, nothing! All kind of talk, excuses about car repairs, what not. I became very infuriated and disappointed, particularly with my father. I went back to Austria and discussed all with my wife. Now that I am here again I came unannounced just to see things for myself. So that is why I came and that is why I want to sleep away from my own family's house which is almost like an insult to my mother but what can I do. If I would sleep there then I tell you, day and night, all the time, every minute of the day they will be in my room and all over me. Asking, demanding, complaining. It is such a big problem to me that I cannot face it. That's why I lodge away from

them. At least when I leave their house and I leave their town and I enter my room I have peace. So recently I had this big family-meeting. I had come with a purpose and with the help of God I was to carry it out. They were all sitting there, my mother, my father, my relatives, other children, many people.

I start by asking how much money my father now has assembled as income from the truck. He says none. What I feel is that I sink. More fury when my father says that I have to pay for repairs for the car.

I already had found out that he has a new wife somewhere in the south and with her he has new children too. All that money that he makes goes to his new wife and nobody sees it. My own mother knows it too but she just lets it happen because she does not know how to speak strongly. My wife says she is too weak. That's why I have come to talk with all of them and I had to make a surprise visit otherwise I would not see them.

This meeting was one of the hardest days in my life. It was like a funeral. Everybody was weeping, my mother was weeping, my father was weeping, in the end everybody was wailing as at a real funeral.

I could not take it but I took it and then I came home and told all to my friend Osei who is my in-law and I wept. Then I went to bed but could not sleep and it is hard to concentrate and think clearly. What I had to tell them was this: That I take the car away from them and sell it. I may have told them I do not want to come to Ghana again, ever. But yesterday I went back to the family amazingly enough it was kind of a healing experience to be together again after all that anger and crying.

All the same later again I hear more bad news and the healing is over! Past! My father has not only generated no income from the car but has made debts up to the tune of 1700 dollar to one person. (Seemingly he is not the only one). I hear the police came yesterday night to lift him from his bed in Kumasi and arrested him. My father was taken to jail.

*Early this morning Samuel left to Kumasi to bail his father out of jail. That is where Samuel is today, with his father at the police station in Kumasi.*

*It's likely he will spend all the money that he brought to Ghana to repair and sell the car, pay the debts of his father and bail him out of jail.*

*Samuel's debt in Austria is still unchanged. He will for the time have to stop building his own house in Accra, which is meant for Samuel and his wife after they have retired.*

*Samuel threatens never to set foot in Ghana again. That's how furious and disappointed he is.*

*Caught between two worlds and nowhere fully at ease! Right now, while Samuel is still in Ghana, Austria is the less troubled place for him. But back in Austria...?*

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## **To Be A Man Is Not Easy ~ The Conference Participant. Interview With Osei Takyi**



I was invited to a conference and that is how I arrived one early morning at the airport of Frankfurt. Forty three years old, first time overseas, big airport and sleepless night. I tried not to show my anxiety and then I saw my friends Rudi and Susan and they hugged me 'Welcome to Germany'. At once I felt good. But also cold and strange. I saw no leaves on the trees. They said you are lucky it is spring now, look at the first green leaves. But wherever I looked the trees looked bare and dead to me. I was in a dream. We drove to their house and then the sun came through, I brought it with me they said! After dinner it was still light outside.

Here in Ghana sun-up 6, sun-down 6, but not over there. I was exhausted and wanted to sleep but sleep would not come because of the light and all the strangeness.

Next morning was Sunday and we went to Church. It was a huge building so I thought there will be thousands of people worshipping there but I saw only twenty-five or so grey haired people. Then we saw another church which they had turned it into a restaurant which I did not want to believe. But I saw it.

In the afternoon we drove to a restaurant with all the participants of the conference and we had pizza. My first time pizza and I had to chose between mushroom, fish, spinach, I don't know how many choices and so finally we tasted

them all and overate! That I enjoyed and that night I slept.

Next day the program started with a visit to a special school for mentally handicapped children. I was amazed to see all their equipment. The atmosphere was good, not much discipline like here in Ghana, no, a lot of liberty for the kids, I even saw some children smoking, the bigger ones, they would go out and have a smoke. In Ghana, never!

They were friendly and asked me so many questions that I was amazed how very free they were and how much they wanted to know about Ghana. They had made paintings and we were to unveil them. The week was wonderful, every day another program, discussions in small groups about development, a forum on globalization, more visits to schools and mostly meeting each other and the German people and looking around seeing the town. We were catching the European spirit. Their town was so serene and quiet, not at all like Ghana where we make noise playing our speakers and so on. I really liked that quiet, it marveled me. Even the train is quiet, straight and swift and well oiled. Two different worlds which I kept comparing. Hospitality is higher in Ghana but the noise level too. In Germany at times they are friendly and at times they just walk away from you when you ask a question. Sunday we closed the conference with a party and we all sang and danced and had fun. Then we left. I took the train to Austria to visit my in-laws there. The next ten days were like a visit to another Ghana, the Ghanaian society in Graz in Austria. The train ride was a new experience. It was cold in the train and at each station there was police who asked me for my passport and ticket. They take your passport and after some time, fifteen minutes or so, bring it back. I understand they look for illegal immigrants but I became very tired with it for I wanted to sleep and at least six times they woke me up because of papers. Then we reached Vienna and it was early morning of the next day. I asked for the train to Graz. The police came with dogs to inspect my bags and they took twenty minutes searching everything, even flipped my bible to see if nothing was hidden in it. Then I took a taxi to another station and found the train to Graz. I admired the landscape, high mountains capped with snow, so beautiful that all the way to Graz I made pictures instead of catching up with sleep. Three hours later I was in Graz and called Samuel's wife to pick me up. She had to work so in a rush she showed me the kitchen and was gone and I was alone! I slept at once and in the evening I heard Samuel open the door and heaven broke loose! We made so much happy noises that even the neighbors came out to see if all was well. We are happy, we said. I was so happy

to be united with Ghanaians again and on top of it they are my real family! While the parents worked their boy showed me all of Graz. He is twelve. He is the one who had time so after school he showed his town to his uncle! I was there for ten days and visited all the Ghanaians from Nkoranza who I all know well. Lunch, dinner, talking, dancing, music, catching up! It was small Nkoranza! In Graz we went to church with the Ghanaians, Samuel's church, and that was great, that was real worship, a full church like here in Ghana! Like being home. The church is underground so the noise does not disturb other people.

Saturday they all came to say goodbye and I left and took the plane to Amsterdam.

That flight was the best experience I had in the air because I saw Holland like a jigsaw puzzle with small green squares which were fields, I saw the houses and much water... so beautiful.

My Dutch friends Danielle and Oscar drove me to their home and right away we saw the flower fields. The next day we visited Schiphol, the airport. Planes from right, planes from left, planes every second or so, amazing. We saw Haarlem and a fishing village and a typical Dutch café, we saw my friend's parents and their friends and we all talked and laughed all the time. Amsterdam, the big city, they showed me the red-light district and I did not believe what I saw, that was a shocker. The women were half to three quarter naked and in glass-houses and this went on and on from one street to another and then a street with male prostitutes which we do not have in Ghana. Danielle and I walked for the whole day without tiring, twenty miles or more. When we wanted to we sat down and took a drink and then we walked again. I loved it.

The next day was "Ghana" again! A friend from Nkoranza took me through his city, Almere, and we ate fufu in the house. He works nights and the wife works days. They have one hour to meet! That's what I saw in Europe, people have no time to meet. In Austria the same. They are all tired and run around so much. This one goes here that one goes there and there is no time to relax.

I then went to Belgium with again another friend from Ghana. We talked, slept, ate, they could not let me go. We saw Antwerp, the big shops, I saw the traditional Jews, I saw everything. Then we returned to Holland. There's no border but police patrols there. My friend who I was driving said: 'look, they see two blacks, they will chase us'. Indeed, they stopped us at the highway from Antwerp to Holland. This is how they catch illegals, if you have no papers then

you go back to Ghana straight! The next day my time was up and I took the train to Germany, a train as beautiful as a plane. I wore all my clothes on top of one another because of the cold. I had time to explore Dortmund and say goodbye to my good friends who organized the conference and together we went through immigration and we hugged and that was it. Back to Frankfurt this time was peanuts to me, I helped others to find their way! Before I knew it I was in the air again. Once back in Ghana I knew that I had really traveled! I suddenly got tired and it hit me that I was back. The heat! I felt it like a stranger! What country is this! So hot and humid!

We went home and had stories to tell! I wrote a journal and every night I read and I remember because I don't want to forget all that I saw.

I saw Europe but I saw the Ghanaians in Europe as well. I knew almost all of them personally. I sympathize with them. They work very hard, it is mostly only working they do, making money. I said to myself now that I came back I have to talk about this to their relatives here at home. In Ghana they think those in Europe live in paradise but if anything they rather live in hell. They come home at night, you sit on the sofa with them, and they have fallen asleep while you talk! Some have two jobs, some have three. Too little time for their own children. They look after their families in Europe and also their families in Ghana. If only the people in Ghana knew! It is a slap in the face of a Ghanaian abroad who sends money home to see that it is squandered! Like Samuel! He works in a steel-factory, his wife has another job. Look at the father in Ghana, squanders the money, asks for more!!

I have to be an advocate for them in Ghana. Here we have the wrong impression. Of course someone comes from outside with a car and the wrong impression is already created. How much has that car cost! It may even be a loan, often people overseas make loans to help their family. No idea, here, and no gratitude but asking for more.

If you have no residence permit you have it tough! You wake at 1 am and make a little money distributing newspapers! Cold, in the night, always illegal and in hiding. People back home may think he is making a lot of money. He sacrifices for the family and they sneer at him for not sending enough money home. Many regret having gone but can't say it out of pride. In Austria blacks and all foreigners come second when there is work opportunity. Europe is good for Europeans but not for me to live. No, I will visit again and then I go back, I prefer

to stay in Ghana. What I also saw is that most Ghanaians go to Britain. There they can talk their own English language and Britain seems to be friendlier towards the black man. Even in friendly Holland Ghanaians are leaving for England. It leaves those that stay behind lonely and dissatisfied, they lose their best friends. The children born outside are hooked to their new country but at least if you raise your children in England it is easier to come and go to Ghana because of the language. Britain is where the real Ghana community is.

I thought before about all these things and now I saw it all with my own eyes!

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## Bamanya: Un Livre Dans La Forêt



Honoré Vinck

Portrait by Ingrid

Bouws

Si tu tires une croix diagonale sur une carte moderne du monde, tu verras que Mbandaka se trouve au centre. Stanley érigeait ici en 1883, un *“outpost of progress”* sous le nom d’*“Equator Station”*. Maintenant, Mbandaka (Coquilhatville jusqu’en 1966) est une des plus grandes villes du Congo, avec entre 100.000 et 150.000 habitants. Le bourg à la rive de cette grande rivière, le Congo, est pauvre; il y a peu ou pas d’industrie.

Dans le centre, les traces de l’époque coloniale sont encore visibles. Le long des larges rues, on trouve les ruines, ou les restes des pillages successifs, des jolies



maisons au style colonial.

Plus de quarante ans de déclin n'ont laissé rien d'entier.

La ville est la capitale de la Province de l'Equateur. Le territoire, deux, trois fois les Pays-Bas, évoque dans le reste du Congo un sentiment compatissant: c'est le pays des chasseurs et des pêcheurs.

Dix kilomètres de Mbandaka se trouve le village de la mission de Bamanya. La piste de sable qui y mène est caractérisée par les légendaires nids de poules qui mettent homme et véhicule à dure épreuve.

Le premier matin de mon séjour, je suis éveillé par des chansons. Une centaine de voix jubilantes d'enfants fait fonction de réveil. Ce sont les enfants de l'école de la Mission qui en guise de gymnastique marchent en galop vers la bourgade voisine. Il est sept heures et demi. Je prends une douche froide, et pendant que je m'habille, la sueur gicle de ma tête.

Les cent cinquante abonnées des *Annales Aequatoria* doivent patienter: Les plaques d'aluminium pour l'imprimerie à Kinshasa se trouvent depuis des mois à Matadi, la ville portuaire du Congo et attendent le dédouanement. C'est un des multiples problèmes contre lesquelles on a à se battre dans ce pays quand on veut entreprendre quelque chose. "C'est l'Afrique" est l'argument sans réplique.

L'annuaire est publié par le Centre Aequataria, Centre de recherches Culturelles Africanistes. Le Centre possède une bibliothèque avec environ 8.000 livres et 300 titres de périodiques. Des archives linguistiques et historiques (locales) complètent cette documentation spécialisée.

Le climat a heureusement peu d'influence sur la condition de conservation des livres. Les ennemis les plus dangereux sont les termites. Beaucoup documents et livres ont disparu au courant des années sous l'action de leur faim insatiable.

La collection documentaire de la bibliothèque est bien limitée et incomplète. Mais si on prend en considération que pour tout budget on dispose d'environ 1.000 Euro, on ne faut pas s'en étonner. Les colis ne doivent plus être transportés au dos, mais la seule voie sûre sont les voyageurs d'Europe ou des transporteurs extrêmement coûteux. Si cette bibliothèque arrive à conserver et même à étendre régulièrement son dépôt de livres de base, cela tient presque au miracle.



## Bibliothèque - Bamanya

Une bibliothèque est une oasis de calme et de culture. Assis parmi des milliers de livres, il est sans importance de savoir où on se trouve dans le monde, on est toujours chez soi.

Pour le prof. dr. Motingea Mangulu de Mbandaka, Aequatoria est une aubaine. Il y a sa propre chambre dans le Guesthouse où il passe souvent ses week-ends. Il y passe souvent quelques jours. Ses documents de travail et son ordinateur se trouvent là.

Le professeur Mangulu (1954) a obtenu son titre de docteur en linguistique en 1996 à l'Université de Leiden (Pays-Bas) avec son étude sur les langues de la Ngiri. Il a séjourné à Leiden pendant une année et demie. *"Aequatoria est l'unique endroit où je peux travailler. Non seulement pour la bibliothèque, mais aussi pour l'atmosphère paisible qui y règne"*, nous confie-t-il.

Un sourire mélancolique est la réponse à ma question concernant ses sentiments après avoir goûté aux possibilités presque illimitées de travail et de recherche scientifique en Occident. *"C'est difficile. C'est bien différent. Ici, la première loi est celle de la survie matérielle."*

*Je ne le demande pas, mais je sais que le salaire moyen d'un professeur de faculté s'ajuste au prix d'une caisse de bière. "Tu ne dois pas comparer", poursuit Mangulu. "Je dois travailler maintenant ici avec les moyens de bord, disponibles sur place. Et alors je suis déjà très heureux. Ici, j'ai pu travailler. Ici, je peux discuter avec le Père Vinck. Ici, je reçois des stimulus intellectuels."*

Le Père Honoré Vinck (1941), membre de la Congrégation des Missionnaires du Sacré Cœur, est le directeur de Centre Aequatoria. Il est rêveur et engagé à la fois, Flamand et citoyen du monde, modeste et dominant, seul et vivant parmi les gens, éloquent et silencieux, ascète avec un verre de bière à la main.

Quand un beau matin j'erre sur le petit cimetière de la Mission, je l'entend

derrière moi: *“Il faut avoir des rêves. Un homme doit rêver. Autrement il ne fait pas de projets. Et il faut des projet pour arriver aux réalisations. Si je commence à rêver, il devient difficile de m’arrêter. C’est origine de l’actuel Aequatoria”*.

Après le lycée classique, Honoré Vinck va étudier la théologie et la philosophie. A la fin des années cinquante l’atmosphère dans l’église catholique était encore très traditionnelle et pieuse.

Il a toujours conservé beaucoup d’estime pour le cours de philosophie classique, aristotélicienne et thomiste. Une vision unilatérale peut-être, mais avec l’avantage d’être familiarisée avec au moins un système de pensée, et qui permet de construire une image logique et structurée du monde.

Le temps des études en Belgique apporte avant tout beaucoup de joies. La littérature scientifique ou romanesque, tout est dévoré. En plus il va se spécialiser dans l’histoire de l’église, en particulier de la liturgie.

Entre-temps, l’église entre en période de turbulence, et Honoré Vinck va étudier à Paris pour obtenir le doctorat en théologie. Un matin, à l’entrée de la station du métro Sèvres-Babylone, il se trouve face à face au slogan en graffiti: *“Révolution”*. C’est mai 1968. *“Cette expérience a été cruciale. Ma pensée politique en va être fortement et durablement influencée. Comment le pouvoir se situe-il par rapport à la société? Comment se situe la pensée et l’idéologie par rapport à la société? La force de l’esprit, de la pensée, est énorme. Le “petit livre rouge” de Mao se vendait partout et se lisait. On se réalisait qu’on vivait un moment majeur de l’histoire contemporaine. Nous avons occupé la faculté de théologie et discuté de la nécessité de réformer la société, en commençant par notre faculté. L’idéalisme politique est merveilleux.”*

Mais il y a aussi une fin aux révolutions et Honoré Vinck achève ses études et se dirige vers le Congo. En février 1972, il atterrit à Mbandaka. Il rentre pour trois mois dans l’isolement linguistique à Bamanya pour apprendre le lomongo sous la direction de Gustaaf Hulstaert, dont il a été le dernier apprenti.



A Mbandaka, on peut voir des femmes et des hommes se promener avec des vêtements en tissus avec la représentation barbue du Père Hulstaert. “*Nkumu ea Mongo*” (noble des Mongo), et “*Bondjea W’elemo*” (le grand savant), en est le message. Quelques années après sa mort, il est déjà entré dans le panthéon des héros fondateurs du peuple Mongo. Il a été une autorité dans la bantouistique moderne. (Grammaire en trois et Dictionnaire en deux volumes) Hulstaert a aussi été en 1937 le co-fondateur de *Aequatoria*, la première revue scientifique publiée dans la colonie(1937-1962).

Honoré Vinck a découvert la bibliothèque de Hulstaert à Bamanya en 1979 et il trouve une nouvelle vocation: la relance de la revue *Aequatoria* et l’ouverture de la bibliothèque aux étudiants et professeurs des Instituts Supérieurs de Mbandaka.

Il trouve partout du scepticisme sur sa route. Hulstaert lui-même n’y croit pas, les supérieurs de son ordre non plus. Mais Vinck persiste et à l’occasion du quatre-vingtième l’anniversaire de Hulstaert, il publie un *Festschrift*, qui relance l’ancien *Aequatoria* sous le nouveau nom de *Annales Aequatoria*. En 1982, il se paie une tournée en Europe pour lancer la revue à un niveau international. En 1987 on peut inaugurer un nouveau bâtiment pour la Bibliothèque et les Archives *Aequatoria*.

*“Il y avait beaucoup de résistance à mes idées. Personne n’en comprenait l’utilité, sauf Misereor en Allemagne qui donnait DM 100.000. Ils avaient compris qu’une bibliothèque peut servir d’outil de développement. Les années suivantes les registres des visiteurs ont prouvé qu’on a eu raison.”*

Ce qui tient Vinck en vie c’est l’amour pour les livres et la passion pour son travail. *“Je considère bel et bien Aequatoria comme un service religieux. Au Moyen-âge, l’église avait ses scriptoria dans les grands couvents. C’est eux qui ont véhiculé la culture classique conservant et copiant les manuscrits des textes des anciens auteurs. Je considère Aequatoria comme un scriptorium. Nous voulons à la fois conserver la culture du peuple et l’initier aux sciences modernes.”*

Les *Annales Aequatoria* veulent être principalement un lieux d’enregistrement

des faits, des dialectes mongo par exemples, pas de discussions ou de grandes théories. On peut dire que les Annales Aequatoria arrivent dans à peu près tous les Instituts Africanistes du monde.

La bibliothèque et la maisonnette du Guesthouse se trouvent dans un cadre idyllique. Un calme parfait y règne. Le jour entier on entend les oiseaux. La douce odeur des roses et les fins traits des orchidées (un héritage de Gustaaf Hulstaert), cultivées dans la pergola, y ajoutent une bouffée romantique.



Aequatoria - Bamanya

Mais il y a toujours le revers de la médaille. Il y a trois ans la Mission a été attaquée. Vinck a passé des heures peureuses dans la forêt. L'année passée, lors de la première guerre de Kabila, la Mission a dû être abandonnée pour plusieurs mois. Quand on est retourné, tout a paru être encore intact. Mais, les gens du village avaient tout enterré dans le sol dans le but de le protéger contre les pilliers: machines à écrire, des papiers qu'on pensait être importants, et en général tout objet de valeur.

Nos confrères congolais sont les premiers pour défendre l'héritage. Aequatoria est même en quelque sorte un objet de prestige. *"Il est clair que dans ce pays c'est une des rares institutions qui effectivement proclament une certaine politique culturelle conséquente: la conservation des langues et des cultures locales dans tous les domaines de la vie, enseignement et église".*

La dernière soirée de mon séjour, devant une bonne bière, je demande à Vinck s'il est satisfait de son travail à Aequatoria. *"Tenant compte de tous les problèmes évoqués, oui, absolument, Naturellement on pourrait faire mille fois mieux, avec un peu plus de moyens."* *"Quels moyens?"* *"Un million de dollars par exemple"* est la réponse claire mais un peu inattendue. Et alors? *"Des livres, beaucoup livres et revues pourront être achetés. Et un ordinateur. Et nous aurons notre propre website. Je doublerais le salaire de mes collaborateurs, et j'organiserais au moins deux fois par an un summerschool de 14 jours, avec les meilleurs professeurs du"*

*monde...*"

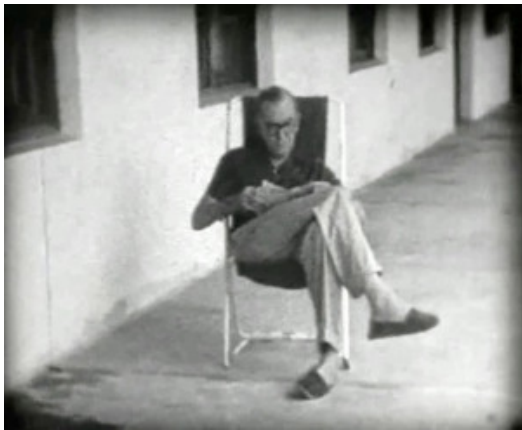
"Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire" ou "Profession de foi d'un vicaire savoyard" ?

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Février 1998

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## **Tiny Bouts Of Contentment. Rare Film Footage Of Graham Greene In The Belgian Congo, March 1959**



Graham Greene in the Belgian Congo

My purpose in this contribution is to present and contextualize the only film footage ever recorded of the novelist Graham Greene (1904-1991) in the Belgian Congo in 1959. The footage was filmed with an 8mm camera, which did not record sound. It belongs to Mrs. Édith Lechat (*née* Dasnoy;1932-) and her husband, the leprosy specialist Doctor (later Professor) Michel Lechat (1927-2014).

From 1953 through 1960, Dr. Lechat was head of the leper hospital and colony of Iyonda, a village and mission station some 15 kms south of the city of

Coquilhatville (now, Mbandaka) in central-western Congo. Greene stayed a number of weeks in Iyonda and other mission stations in the region in search of inspiration, a setting, and material for a new novel. The novel, *A Burnt-Out Case*, appeared in 1960, and was dedicated to Dr. Lechat. Greene occupied a room in the house of the missionary fathers in Iyonda, but spent long parts of his days with the doctor and his family. The film reached me through the hands of Édith Lechat, who had it transposed to a DVD-playable format, and via my friend Hendrik (a.k.a., “Henri” or “Rik”) Vanderslaghmolen (1921-), who was a missionary in the region at the time. As he was one of the only Belgian missionaries there with some knowledge of English, he often accompanied Graham Greene during his trips from one mission station to another. Rik Vanderslaghmolen and the Lechats are still close friends today.

Much of the information I offer below stems from conversations I had with both Rik Vanderslaghmolen and Édith Lechat in July and August 2013. Regrettably, Dr. Michel Lechat’s poor health condition did not allow me to probe his memory, but an interview he gave for the Brussels-based weekly *The Bulletin* on the occasion of Greene’s death in 1991 is available (Lechat 1991), as well as a closely similar talk he gave at the 2006 Graham Greene Festival in Berkhamsted, published in the [London Review of Books](#) in August 2007 (Lechat 2007). Édith Lechat has given me the kind permission to share the film with the readership of *Rozenberg Quarterly* and to add the necessary contextual information on both the historical situation and the contents of the film.



Graham Greene (right, 54 years old) with Dr Michel Lechat (31 years old) and Lechat’s two first-born children, Marie and Laurent. Car park in front

of the airfield of Coquilhatville, the Belgian Congo, 5 March 1959. Photo reproduced with permission from Edith Lechat.

Snippets of the film were used in a documentary the BBC produced on Graham Greene in 1993 ([\*The Graham Greene Trilogy\*](#), by Donald Sturrock). Yet, the order in which the documentary presented the snippets did not respect the original course of the film and they were, in any case, fragmentary. Also, neither the film bits nor the voice-overs in the documentary provided much information on Greene's stay in the Congo and his relation with the Belgian missionaries, but rather served to portray Greene's personality, i.e. to illustrate what some interviewees described as his tendency to falsely pretend happiness and gaiety while in reality being a sombre and depressed man, especially in those years. My contribution here is thus an opportunity to present, for the first time, the film in its full and unedited length, and to zoom in on the Congolese and missionary circumstances under which it was made.

Graham Greene's journey to the Belgian Congo took place in the beginning of 1959; to be precise, he arrived by plane in Leopoldville (now, Kinshasa) on 31 January and left that city again for Brazzaville on 7 March 1959. He was in Iyonda from 2 to 11 February and again from 26 February to 5 March, visiting other mission stations in between these two periods. The reason why some 35 years later Greene wrote that "In 1959 I spent about three months in and around the leper colony of Iyonda in the then Belgian Congo" (Greene in Hogarth 1986: 108) and why in the same way he mentioned "months" in an interview heard in part 2 of the BBC documentary, remains unclear. His stay in the Congo must have appeared much longer to him with hindsight than it had been in reality. Either way, in 1958 he had a rough idea for a book in mind, namely a stranger arriving in a leper colony run by a missionary order. When Greene was searching for a suitable leper colony in a remote place of the globe which he could visit to substantiate his technical knowledge of leprosy and where he could spend time with missionaries, a mutual Belgian friend told him about Michel Lechat and his work in the Congo (Lechat 1991, 2007). He wrote three letters to the doctor, who in turn discussed it with the missionary fathers of Iyonda and Coquilhatville, and his stay was arranged.



The missionary congregation in charge of Iyonda, Coquilhatville, and the other mission stations Greene visited during his Congo journey was the Belgian branch of the Catholic Missionaries of the Sacred Heart (*Missionnaires du Sacré-Coeur de Jésus*, MSC), which included among its members the famed specialists and guardians of the Mongo people, Edmond Boelaert (1899-1966) and Gustaaf Hulstaert (1900-1990), and which produced the proto-scholarly and socially committed journal *Æquatoria* (1937-1962), later succeeded by *Annales Æquatoria* (1980-2009) (see Vinck 1987, 2012 and [www.aequatoria.be](http://www.aequatoria.be) for more details). The MSC missionaries and their bishop Mgr Hilaire Vermeiren (1889-1967) were particularly proud to receive the famous author, who had not only converted to Catholicism in his early twenties but some of whose books, such as *Brighton Rock*, *The Lawless Roads*, *The Power and the Glory*, *The Heart of the Matter*, and *The End of the Affair*, also developed profoundly Catholic themes.



Entrance to the Iyonda leprosy, with the missionary fathers' house on the left, where Greene was accommodated. The first part of the 8mm film was recorded on the loggia of this house. Photo reproduced with permission from R. Vanderslaghmolen.

During his stay in the Congo, Greene kept a diary in which he noted down daily observations, thoughts and conversations, and in which he tried out some characterizations and pieces of story for the novel: "I took advantage of the opportunity to talk aloud to myself, to record scraps of imaginary dialogue and incidents, some of which found their way into my novel, some of which were

discarded" (Greene 1968 [1961]: 7). Afterwards, the diary was thoroughly proofread by Dr. Lechat, who did not only correct technical errors related to leprosy and leprosy treatment but also cleaned out quite some painful descriptions of real people and situations, before it was published, in 1961, under the title *In Search Of A Character: Congo Journal*. It contains the dates and locations of Greene's whereabouts, and mentions the various missionaries, colonials and other people he met on his way. In an article posthumously published in *Annales Æquatoria*, Gustaaf Hulstaert identified each MSC missionary mentioned in the diary and also attempted to find clues in *A Burnt-Out Case* (Hulstaert 1994). Hulstaert ends his article with a defence of his fellow missionaries, most of whom Greene had depicted in not so favourable terms in the diary and, less explicitly identified, in the novel as well. Greene had found many of them, although kind and hospitable (see also his words in Hogarth 1986: 108), not widely educated, rather naive and infantile, easily amused by college types of humour and immature games, some of them cruel with animals, others lazy, and all of them occupied with all sorts of logistics, such as constructing buildings, running schools, laying in provisions, but not with the spiritual fundamentals and higher goals of motivated Christianity.

One of the exceptions was the bishop, Mgr Vermeiren. Greene and Vermeiren seem to have shared the same perception of the priests; testament to this is what Vermeiren wrote to the MSC provincial superior in Belgium in 1957: "It is my impression that quite a number of our priests are not mature. For people holding university degrees, they sometimes behave so childishly" (letter to Jozef Van kerckhoven, 26 April 1957, MSC Archives). In his diary, Greene appreciates Vermeiren for being "a wonderfully handsome old man with an eighteenth-century manner - or perhaps the manner of an Edwardian boulevardier" (Greene 1968 [1961]: 26), and lauds his cultivation as well as his bravery and tenacity in the difficult years of decolonization (1968 [1961]: 40; see also Hulstaert 1989). In the many years of professional and friendship contacts I have had with members of the MSC, I have learned that priests and friars who worked under Vermeiren are in general less eulogistic about him, remembering him especially for his aloofness and sense for pomp and rank - a characterization which also surfaces in biographical sketches such as Van Hoorick (2004: 26). This discrepancy is indicative of Greene's general preference for patrician class and high-cultured milieus, and in any case suggests that his interpretive grid was considerably remote from the fathers', leading more than once to a misunderstanding or at

least to a lack of connection. This want of mutual understanding and connection is also mentioned by Hulstaert (1994: 501-502) and was similarly reported to me by Rik Vanderslaghmolen and Édith Lechat.

One of the MSC missionaries working in the Congo was Martin (Adolf) Bormann Jr. (1930-2013), first-born son of Adolf Hitler's private secretary Martin Bormann, and Hitler's godson. Converted to Catholicism at the age of 17, he studied theology and was ordained priest in 1958, in the Austrian-German branch of the MSC (MSC 1963: 255). He went to the Congo for the first time in May 1961, where he was assigned to the mission station of Mondombe, in the easternmost diocese of the MSC mission region, some 800 kms east of Iyonda and Coquilhatville. In 1964, fleeing the advancing Simba rebels, he lived for some days hidden in cassava fields, but was nonetheless caught (Bormann 1965, 1996). In November 1964, he was freed by Belgian paratroopers and repatriated to Europe. He went back to the Congo for a second term of one year in March 1966 and left priesthood in 1971. On 12 February 1959, the day when Greene arrives in the mission station of Bokuma, located some 70 kms northeast of Iyonda but still some 700 kms away from Mondombe, he writes "Incidentally Martin Bormann's son is somewhere here in the bush" (1968 [1961]: 44-45). However, in 1959 Bormann had not yet arrived in the Congo. An explanation for this confusing anachronism in Greene's diary is to be found in the fact that, as Édith Lechat and Rik Vanderslaghmolen reported to me, Martin Bormann's entrance in the congregation of the MSC and his being assigned to the missions in the Belgian Congo raised some dust among missionaries and colonials in the vicariate of Coquilhatville. In 1959, Bormann's anticipated arrival was, in fact, the talk of the town in Coquilhatville and depending mission stations. Greene must have picked up the news and misinterpreted it, believing Bormann had already arrived.

*A Burnt-Out Case* is set in a leprosy in the Belgian Congo and has as one of its protagonists a Belgian doctor (Dr. Colin), head of the leprosy, who, moreover, works in close collaboration with a group of missionaries, whose personalities and characters conjure up the MSC missionaries Greene met during his journey. In his dedication of the novel to Dr. Lechat (Greene 1977 [1960]: 5), Greene insists that the leprosy in the novel is not literally the one in Iyonda, even if he may have copied "superficial characteristics" from it. He also avers that Dr. Colin is not Dr. Lechat: apart from the fact that he has the same experience of leprosy, the character is in "nothing else" based on him. As far as the missionaries are

concerned, Greene admits that he gave the Superior of the mission station to which the leprosy is attached in the novel, the same habit of smoking one cheroot after the other and of spilling ashes on everything and everyone in his vicinity as he had seen the Superior in *Iyonda*, Pierre Wynants (1914-1978), do. Also, Greene says the river boat on which the main character Querry, and later Parkinson, travel to and from the leprosy is inspired by the steamer which Mgr Vermeiren had put at his disposal in 1959 and on which he was often accompanied by Rik Vanderslaghmolen. But apart from that, Greene insists, none of the central characters is based on any particular person he had met in the Congo, and the novel “is not a *roman à clef*, but an attempt to give dramatic expression to various types of belief, half-belief, and non-belief, in the kind of setting, removed from world-politics and household-preoccupation, where such differences are felt acutely and find expression” (Greene 1977 [1960]: 5). Yet, however much I agree that reading *A Burnt-Out Case* as a *roman à clef* would severely miss the author’s point and defeat the purpose of the artistic experience, there do seem to be closer resemblances than Greene admits.



The river steamer *Theresita*, property of the MSC missionaries in the Congo and used by Graham Greene in 1959 to move from one mission station to another. Photo reproduced with permission from R. Vanderslaghmolen.

First of all, much like Greene, Querry, too, defends himself against allegations, from Marie, that the story he is telling her would be an allegory of his past and that he would be the boy appearing in it. Querry retorts to her: “They always say a novelist chooses from his general experience of life, not from special facts” (Greene 1977 [1960]: 152). Greene could have spoken exactly the same words in defence of *A Burnt-Out Case*. Secondly, Querry displays the same lack of impatience with what he feels to be the priests’ mediocrity as Greene shows in his diary, and both Greene and Querry are sickened by the fondness for gratuitous game hunting of one particular missionary, who, moreover, is both in the novel and in real life the captain of the river steamer (real person: Georges Léonet, 1922-1974). Thirdly, the bishop in the novel is depicted as an aristocratic and highly refined gentleman. He is described as “an old-fashioned cavalier of the boulevards” (Greene 1977 [1960]: 64), which is no less than an immediate echo of the words “Edwardian boulevardier” Greene used in his diary to describe Mgr Vermeiren. What is more, the bishop in the novel is a fond player of bridge (1977 [1960]: 64). The diary does not make mention of Vermeiren’s avid passion for this card game, but this passion is still legendary among MSC members today – not in the least Rik Vanderslaghmolen, who was often summoned to drive Mgr Vermeiren to outlying bridge venues. Fourth, in the same way as Greene is on record for having been a womanizer, drawing much of his success with the other sex from his fame (i.a., Sheldon 1994), Querry, too, looks back on a life in which his status and celebrity as an artist-architect earned him considerable attention from women. Fifth, Greene was already world-famous before his departure to the Congo, and as the anticipation of too much attention annoyed him greatly, he travelled in the Congo under the pseudonym “Mr. Graham” (Lechat 1991, 2007). In the diary, Greene more than once noted down his irritation with admirers, mostly Belgian colonials, who in spite of his attempted anonymity managed to approach him to discuss literary matters or submit creative writings of their own to his appreciation and advice. Michel Lechat recounts the funny anecdote of how Greene, upon spotting from far an admirer driving in the direction of the leprosy, would run into the Lechats’ house, jump out of the rear window of their bedroom, and run away into the forest (Lechat 1991, 2007). Querry, too, is an internationally renowned artist, whose success and praises have worn him out. In fact, the very reason for his leaving Europe and hiding away in the Congo is his self-unmasking as a second-rate artist and his related desire to vanish from sight. The nail in Querry’s coffin is Mr. Rycker, Marie’s husband and a Belgian colonial entrepreneur relentlessly exasperating Querry with tributes

and references to his grand artistic achievements. Again, the resemblance between Querry and Greene is too striking to be left unnoticed. Lechat in fact also remembers a number of other anecdotes and actual situations that befell Greene in the Congo and that are almost literally lived by Querry in the novel (Lechat 1991, 2007). Decidedly, as the biographer Norman Sherry put it, “in describing [...] Querry, Greene is describing himself” (Sherry 2004: 194), and much more so than the novelist was prepared to recognize.

A Britain-based author of many novels set in tropical places, who goes to the Congo in order to find inspiration for a new book, travels the Congo river or its tributaries on a steamer, keeps a Congo diary in preparation of the book, and, in his literary creation, connects outer-world removal from all things familiar with inner-world self-confrontation, despair, and madness - one cannot help being reminded of Joseph Conrad and his *Heart of Darkness* and *An Outpost of Progress* (for Conrad’s Congo diary see Najder 1978 and also Stengers 1992).

Evidently, in terms of writing style, no two authors could be more unlike than Greene and Conrad. Although both privilege themes of gloom, failure, and disillusion and even though they both gauge the characters’ psychological and emotional states and changes (see also Stape 2007, among others, on Conrad’s heritage in Greene’s work), Greene’s style is much less oriented towards sensuality and sensation, is story-practical, and is above all narrative- and action-driven whereas Conrad’s is description-based. Of more importance is the fact that, and the ways in which, Greene invokes Conrad on more than one occasion in his Congo diary. The diary entries reveal how heavily Conrad’s shadow had been hanging over Greene since his first days as a novelist.

First of all, we find several appropriate but terse and spontaneous citations from *Heart of Darkness* in the diary. When contemplating Leopoldville, Greene briefly cites, without any identification of the self-evident source: ““And this also”, said Marlow suddenly, “has been one of the dark places of the earth”” (Greene 1968 [1961]: 15). And when admiring the Congo river at Iyonda, he writes down “This has not changed since Conrad’s day. ‘An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest.’” (1968 [1961]: 18). We later on learn that Greene has found his Congo journey to be a perfect occasion to reread *Heart of Darkness*. In itself, this is not particularly noteworthy, as many a European has done the same when travelling to the Congo for the first time. What is of interest is that, on the day of 12 February 1959, Greene confesses that in 1932, i.e. at the age of 28 already, he

had abandoned reading Conrad altogether, because it filled him with a strong sense of inferiority as a writer: “Reading Conrad – the volume called *Youth* for the sake of *The Heart of Darkness* – the first time since I abandoned him about 1932 because his influence on me was too great and too disastrous. The heavy hypnotic style falls around me again, and I am aware of the poverty of my own” (1968 [1961]: 42).

At that young age, Greene thus stopped reading Conrad – “that blasted Pole [who] makes me green with envy”, as he once referred to him (Keulks 2006: 466) – in order to avoid the risk of being too much influenced by him. Could this be where we have to find the origins of Greene’s strongly opposite writing style, a style he developed in reaction to Conrad’s, which he held in great awe and at the same time considered unattainable? Édith Lechat recalls how she and her husband once mentioned their great keenness for Conrad in a conversation with Greene, and how his reaction was unusually evasive and crabby. So crabby that the three never raised the subject Conrad again. Fascinatingly, a bit later, when he has progressed further in the book, Greene makes a new assessment of the novel as compared to his reading of it in his twenties: “Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* still a fine story, but its faults show now. The language too inflated for the situation. Kurtz never comes really alive. [...] And how often he compares something concrete to something abstract. Is this a trick that I have caught?” (Greene 1968 [1961]: 44). Whether one agrees with Greene’s appreciation or not (at least as far as Kurtz is concerned, I do), what we seem to be witnessing here is a moment later in Greene’s life at which he overcomes his self-degrading veneration of Conrad. The 54-year old, mature Greene, now rereading *Heart of Darkness* “as a sort of exorcism” (Lechat 1991: 16), has found faults in Conrad’s characterizations and has discovered a stylistic trick he believes he was overusing. These demystifying discoveries seem to enable Greene for the first time in his life to step out of Conrad’s overpowering shadow, to free himself from the burden of his inescapable ubiquity, now undone.

[http://rozenbergquarterly.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GG\\_titles\\_08092013\\_25MB.mp4](http://rozenbergquarterly.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/GG_titles_08092013_25MB.mp4)

8mm film of Graham Greene in Iyonda, the Belgian Congo, 5 March, 1959. Reproduced with permission from Edith Lechat and Rik Vanderslaghmoelen.

*Click video to play. Click lower right corner of video to enter full screen. Press “escape” to exit full screen. Note: We are aware of an issue with this video in*

*some internet browsers and are working on a solution.*

The camera for this 8mm film was held by Father Paul Van Molle (1911-1969), the later superior of the Iyonda mission and leper colony. Greene mentions Father Paul only once, and briefly, in his diary, namely on 10 February, when receiving a haircut from him (1968 [1961]: 38). Greene himself does not mention or allude to the filming in his diary in any way. On the basis of a series of clues, Édith Lechat has been able to reconstruct that the filming took place in the morning and at lunch time of Greene's last day at Iyonda, namely Thursday 5 March 1959. Later in the afternoon, the Lechat family would drive Graham Greene to the airfield of Coquilhatville, where he was to board a plane to Leopoldville. With Greene's departure imminent, Father Paul realized the fathers and the Lechat family had not yet captured his presence among them on film, and therefore hastened to do so.

The film as shown here was not edited: all 'cuts' are moments at which Paul Van Molle switched the camera off and on again. The film, 4 minutes and 40 seconds in length, can be said to consist of two main parts, each filmed at a different time of the day and at a different location in Iyonda. The first part, running until 2'19", is shot in the morning time on the loggia, named *barza* in Belgian colonial parlance, of the fathers' house, where Greene was accommodated (see also photo of Iyonda above). The second part, running from 2'23" until the end, is an hour or two later, i.e. at lunch time, in the Lechat house, which was a few hundred meters away from the fathers' house. On 27 February, Greene writes that "I no longer bother to go to the Congo [river] to read" (1968 [1961]: 66), a habit he used to entertain during his first stay in Iyonda from 2 to 11 February. The first twelve seconds of the film show Greene stretched out in a deck chair on the fathers' *barza* reading a book, which according to the diary must be Belloc's Catholic testimony *The Path to Rome* (1968 [1961]: 76). The fact that he is doing his daily reading there, and not on the banks of the Congo river, confirms that the film was recorded during Greene's second stay in Iyonda.

The other details of the first part of the film are as follows. After 0'12", we see that Greene has put the book aside and is engaged in a conversation with whom we discover a bit later to be Édith Lechat, then 27 years old, standing on the edge of the *barza*. Shortly after that, Father Rik Vanderslaghmolen, aged 38, joins in from behind Greene. As I mentioned above, Rik was one of Greene's main escorts during his Congo journey, and in that capacity his name reappears quite



frequently in the diary. At the time of Greene's visit, Vanderslaghmolen was on leave in Iyonda to recover from illness (see also Hulstaert 1994: 498). Both the film and the diary show a Vanderslaghmolen as his family, confreres, and friends, including myself, know him best, namely as a frolicsome practical joker, an impish leg-puller, an ever good-humoured, jesting entertainer. As the three are having an amicable, relaxed conversation, Greene remaining seated, the zoom is close enough for an experienced lip reader to decipher what Greene is saying, probably in (broken) French, the language in which he habitually conversed with Édith Lechat (whereas he mostly used English with her husband). From 0'32" through 0'39", Greene is entertained by the Lechat children, Marie (4.5 years old) and, on his little tricycle, Laurent (2.5). Then, from 0'39" to 0'45", Greene is filmed holding a camera to photograph the cameraman, Rik stepping in and whimsically hindering Greene from looking into the camera viewer. After that (0'46" - 0'58"), Greene and Rik are larking about, Rik blocking the door of the house to prevent Greene, clutching his inseparable whisky flask, from coming in. In the following bit, until 1'13", we first see Greene with Édith Lechat, lighting a cigarette, and her two children, immediately followed by Rik and Greene sillily engaged in a mock waltz, a stunt clearly triggered by the filming occasion. Next (1'13" - 1'20"), Rik amuses his company by trying to squeeze his lofty body into little Laurent's tricycle. After Greene picks up his book and glasses and regains his deck chair, and Édith Lechat, following her daughter, leans through a window of the fathers' house to have a conversation with someone inside, Dr. Lechat has joined the company and a chat ensues between the three (until 2'19"), Greene still seated, Michel and Édith Lechat standing. Michel Lechat's and Greene's gazes (1'56" - 1'59") reveal a light, good-hearted annoyance with the camera's intrusion.

The second part of the footage is shot in the house of the Lechats, showing Greene with the Lechat family at lunch, assisted by their Congolese servant Mongu Henri (year of birth unknown). This takes place only a few hours after the morning scene at the fathers' house. It can be noticed, however, that Greene has changed shirts, possibly in anticipation of his flight to Leopoldville (notice that it is the same shirt as in the photo above, taken in the car park at the Coquilhatville airfield). Gazes into the lens and nervous laughter make it clear that the company, although trying to behave naturally, remain acutely aware of the camera's presence during the entirety of the meal. My poor lip reading skills aside, I venture to say that at 3'36" - 3'38", Mrs. Lechat, slightly embarrassed, addresses the cameraman with the words "*Père Paul, arrête! Arrête de filmer, s'il te plaît!*"

("Father Paul, stop! Stop filming, please!"). Between 3'16" and 3'20", we witness Dr. Lechat repairing his photo camera, the same camera with which, a few hours later, his wife would take the picture in the airfield car park.

The second half of the 1950s was one of the darkest periods in Greene's life, specifically after the break-up with his mistress Catherine Walston (i.a., Shelden 1994; Sherry 2004; R. Greene 2008). His manic depression reached the most severe point he had experienced until then, he self-reported to feel chronically miserable, even to have turned into a misanthrope. In the BBC documentary, relations and friends of Graham Greene's narrate how he was an absolute master in masking away this gloominess and dejection, concealing it under the exact opposite - merriment, smiles, superficial gaiety. Appearing in off-screen voice, his wife Vivien Greene explains that: "I've discovered, and I'm sure I'm right, that people who are great on practical jokes are very unhappy. And I think it was when Graham was most unhappy that he started all these practical jokes. [...] It was I'm quite sure when he was most deeply unhappy that he had this spell of practical joking, which people think of as high spirits but I don't think it is." Her off-screen voice is heard over (very short) bits of images showing Graham Greene dancing around with Rik Vanderslaghmoelen on the fathers' *barza* and looking happily entertained at lunch with the Lechat family. The message of the documentary makers is clear: Greene's gaiety and insouciance visible on the Congo footage are make-believe, a shallow pose that when scratched away reveals a deeper, lurking despondency. I do not wish entirely to refute this analysis, but at the same time would like to invoke the album, also mentioned above, that the graphic artist Paul Hogarth made on the locations appearing as settings in Greene's novels (Hogarth 1986).

In commentaries Greene added to Hogarth's paintings in this album, the novelist remembered his time in Iyonda as not particularly gloomy: "It was not a depressing experience. [...] Most of my memories of the *léproserie* are happy ones - the kindness of the fathers and friendship of Dr. Lechat to whom the book is dedicated" (Greene in Hogarth 1986: 108-112). Certainly, the late 1950s were dark, dismal years in Graham Greene's life, and to be sure the writing of *A Burnt-Out Case* constituted a terrible artistic ordeal for him - as he put it: "What was depressing was writing the novel and having to live for two years with a character like Query. I thought it would be my last novel" (Greene in Hogarth 1986: 108). But perhaps the time he spent in the Congo with Dr. and Mrs. Lechat and with the

fathers, among whom the comic and generous teaser Rik Vanderslaghmolen, who according to Édith Lechat was “the only person really capable of making Graham Greene laugh and have fun”, triggered off tiny bouts of contentment in Greene’s tormented soul. A contentment surely initiated from the outside, and maybe ephemeral and fleeting, but nonetheless momentarily highly efficacious.

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See also: <http://grahamgreenebt.org/>

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