

Lola Ya Bonobo Newsletter

July - August - September 2008

While Olympic delegations from around the world marched behind their banners at the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in Beijing, Tatango, our best bonobo athlete, vaulted over the electric fence surrounding his enclosure, cheered on by the admiring females. I guess everyone has their audience! But all's well that ends well! Mama Yvonne brought him back, very calm but most certainly very proud of himself. Well he should be, because in his short time out of the enclosure, he managed to borrow a wheelbarrow, destroy an easel in the educational tent, and even had a drink at the refreshment stand in celebration!



On our way to Basankusu:

This time, it's no longer just a dream: we're setting off! Finally! Pierrot and I had to be seated and buckled up in the plane before we really believed it! Keep in mind, we'd already had to endure three failed attempts, one of which we abandoned during the final phase (our bags had even been registered!). The crisis and rising fuel prices in the DRC (not only the DRC!) greatly reduced our number of fellow passengers, able to pay the 840 dollars for a round-trip ticket from Kinshasa to Basankusu!

On board, we had our precious cargo: all the text books, educational material and notebooks for the seven schools of the Ilonga Mpô, the future guardians of the bonobos that will be reintroduced into a part of their forest next year. My first worry had always been to support them in their quest: to educate their children despite their isolation. Nothing was more inspiring than the pride of the Mpô people! I had already after my first visit, pleaded their case to the French Ambassador in the DRC. It was important that he be aware that the French language had indeed penetrated the dense equatorial forest thanks to catholic and protestant missionary schools. Our association, the A.B.C. therefore did everything in its power to help this educational dream come true.

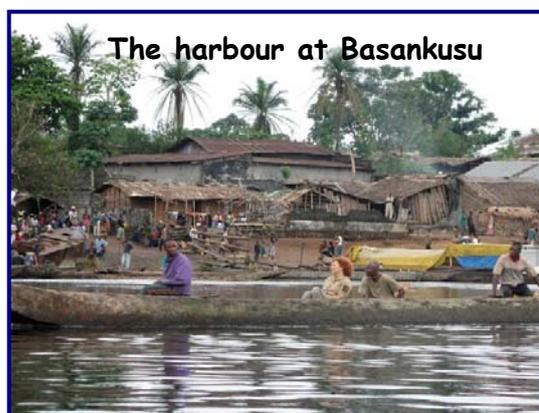


The French government responded positively to our request, so the supplies were purchased and we will now be able to ensure a real school year for the Mpô children! We'll also be giving them blackboards and chalk, and maybe we'll even find a way of making some new school benches to replace the bamboo ones the children are using now! On board of the « Filair » Antonov-24, our parcels were everywhere! Under

every seat! I had some under my knees and on my feet... (here, everything is possible!)

A big welcoming committee was awaiting us in Basankusu, where we were to finalize the cooperation agreements with the chiefs of the Ilonga Mpô. They officially pledged to become the guardians of the bonobos, while continuing to enjoy their full rights in the forest. Only in the zone we're marking off « Ekolo ya bonobo » will there be a total ban on hunting. This time, the adventure can really begin!

We flew over the great Mai-Ndombe Lake, which showed a beautiful contrast between its black waters and white, sandy beaches. All around it, as far as the eye could reach, the impenetrable, dense forest that the bonobos call home stretched out in every direction. I had in my backpack, a manuscript sent to me by José Dosonge to entertain me in my sleepless hours. This former member of the Belgian colonial administration lived in Basankusu in the 50s and already after the first few pages, I could see that his precursor ideas were very similar to my own. Its thanks to chance encounters like this one that I fully appreciate my luck to have come here in 1951 and to have passed from the statute of a child of the colony, to that of an « expat » of the third republic. I still think about it to this day!



The signing of the collaboration agreement with the « Ilonga-Mpô »

It was barely 6 o'clock, dawn had left a grey cloak of mist hovering over the Lulonga river. The colour of the sky left little to hope for! Shame! We had planned to accompany the pirogues of the Mpô who were to return home after our important meeting the previous day.

In joyful spirit, together we had signed an agreement which is fundamental to the establishment of "Ekolo ya Bonobo".

My choice of the forest of the Ilonga Mpôo population had been made for over a year. I know just how, the many years of a tradition whereby people belong to the land they live on is deeply rooted in the minds of the native populations. For this reason we had had to step lightly...

The piece of land I was asking for, limited to the north by the Molambi river, is considered mythical in their tradition and so remained a topic for discussion. Neither Pierrot, nor our technical partners, nor the presence of Marie-Laure had managed to convince them that once committed to the final and official phase, the Mpôo had to



accept and respect our sole agreement not to hunt beyond that river! All the representatives of the Mpôo community were willing, but... far from the Molambi river! That's just how it is when it comes to the beliefs and customs of the people of the forest. A few "magic" trees, and a mythical watercourse had reduced the terrain for Ekolo ya Bonobo, to become too narrow and too small, much too small... for my liking.

One week later, after endless discussions where we believed we were making headway, but then with just one unexpected or indirect question, we would find ourselves right back where we had started, we finally managed to come to an agreement! "Ekolo" will be established exactly where I have dreamed it! The Ilonga-Mpôo fully understood that they would still be able to live the joys of gathering fruit, and of fishing and the collecting of caterpillars so rich in precious proteins. The only forbidden activity will be to hunt with traps, poisoned arrows and firearms. And believe me, for the Mpôo it is not a big sacrifice as the forest of their ancestors is almost 20 times larger than "Ekolo ya Bonobo"! Not to forget that the latter is flooded during the rainy season and has been void of game for years.

In exchange we will help them, they will have a dependable spokesperson in the capital, people who will think about them and respect them for giving their word.



The agreement is made

Following all this, we returned to the village! The AWF helped us by supplying an additional pirogue, ours being overloaded! Many friends of Lola also supported us by bringing useful gifts, which will mean so much to the Mpôo and their children who are completely destitute.



The "Nkumu" (local chief) resembling a figurehead proudly wore what he calls "his 32 teeth". 32 leopard canines which following tradition, were passed down to him from his ancestors. As for me, I enjoyed the calm dark waters of the Lopori, its string of islands and its luxurious forest. Without waiting the sun was unveiled and in the searing heat I had to take out my indispensable parasol. My men laughed even though they too have picked up the habit of

bringing an umbrella to protect them from the sun!

As we passed by, Pierrot hailed a man perched at the top of a raffia palm tree. He had



fresh palm wine, barely alcoholised, a real treat! The calabash made its way along the pirogue, " It's really delicious!" stated Pierrot filling my cup as he wiped his mouth. And believe me, if the city dweller inside me loves a nice French white wine, an aperitif savouring this light and fresh raffia wine on the river is also a moment of sheer pleasure!

Every now and then we greeted the fishermen, busily seeking the fish that we would cook on the glowing embers that very evening as we sit around the fire in a camp somewhere along the Lopori.

At that very moment I thanked the bonobos from the bottom of my heart for having brought me on this adventure that allowed me to rediscover the depths of the Congo, the hospitable people, the beautiful scenery and the primary rainforest of the Congo Basin. - Yes, here in the midst of this black mirror, sliced by our pirogue, I was experiencing a part of my paradise.



Little Amazone

"Bon voyage Amazone! And good luck!" I shouted from the riverbank, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye (for hope or by despair?). In front of me on the river was a long barge, a real "people boat" leaving the harbour. On the quay, surrounded by their merchandise, remained the many people who had hoped for the generosity of the captain till the very end. They tried everything to make the trip to Kinshasa, the only one available to them with the little money they have. It had been several months since a boat had docked here. Despite their disappointment, they waved off the "selected

few" who were holding on here and there, packed pretty much everywhere on the barge. Only the captain's deck seemed somewhat orderly.

A few days before, a young couple had done all they could to meet me. They had come into the heart of our house, the father, carrying a little girl, 6 or 7 years old, with her face half covered by a cloth. They informed me that their child is called Amazone, "she isn't ill, you needn't worry about contagion." She had a tumour and so they unveil her face. Great heavens! How could I hide the look of surprise on my face? The right side



of her face was intact, but the other side was completely deformed by the massive tumour, the eye almost out of the socket could no longer be closed to protect the already dried out cornea. They then told me their story. This "thing" had started to show about 12 months before, in their village far within the forest, home to wild bonobos. They had tried to help the child by ripping out a tooth that seemed to be the source of the pain, but the swelling had just continued. They then decided to embark on the long pirogue trip down the Maringa River to find help in Basankusu. At the hospital a nurse diagnosed her with Burkitt's lymphoma, but obviously he had no way of treating her with chemotherapy! A local church had helped by ordering medication from Kinshasa but the treatment, which was just too expensive, was stopped despite the positive

results. "A hundred dollars per injection" they told me, "we just don't have that kind of money!"

At that point, (now poorer then ever), what with the departure of the boat being so close and my presence in Basankusu they had seen a glimmer of hope. My mind was a whirlwind. I definitely didn't have enough personal funds to take her on and should the ABC take on the responsibility of the Director's feelings? But how would I ever be able to look at myself in the mirror with out a feeling of guilt if I didn't at least try to do something for little Amazone?

I have so many friends all over the world, surely I was going to be able to find a few sensitive souls. "La chain of hope" or "Doctors without borders" would they not be able to help relieve the physical pain and mental distress of this little girl?

But paying the embarkation ticket was one thing, but I was also going to have to convince the captain that she was not dangerous for the other passengers! Once that was done he then asked me to commit to cover the costs should she die during the journey... I used all the words I could to thank him for his graceful and humanitarian act, allowing them to travel on his boat. I watched as the "floating village" set off down the Lulonga; soon to meet the great Congo River. What a paradox! " Amazone was to travel on the Congo"! Once the ripples had calmed down the black waters became a perfect mirror once again. I stayed a while pondering as I watched them disappear on

the horizon, she too was going to need sponsors from far and wide, just like our orphaned baby bonobos...

Life in Basankusu quickly went back to normal, a few pirogues were already sliding up and down the river. I had much to do that day! One mission was to try to confiscate a little bonobo that had been brought back from the Maringa region and was kept by a Captain of the DRC Armed Forces. His major didn't seem to have much influence in front of such stubbornness! And yet, god only knows how lucky we are in Basankusu: The troupes were very receptive to our presence and had even asked us to visit them and give them presentations! Pierrot met with the militaries, showed a few films and explained over and over again why we all need to help in the conservation of the bonobos: "100% Congolese!" That is the magic phrase, which can convince nearly anyone! We made the most of the opportunity to try to get our hands on the baby bonobo... Too late! He had already died a few days before...



The epidemic

Since my arrival in Basankusu, everyone who had come to greet me had told me of a porcine disease that, everyday, was taking the lives of the few pigs that had survived the pillage by soldiers and the war. Last March I had already heard that it had taken hold in Djolu and even in Wamba (The scientific reserve in Luo held by our friends, the Japanese primatologists); so the epidemic had managed to spread throughout the entire province of Equateur! "They die one after the other." said my missionary neighbour, "Even those that cost so much to bring all the way from Kinshasa. They seemed more resistant, but alas, they too are affected by the epidemic! And that's not all! We also lost a good number of our chickens early last year!" Local beliefs don't need much to take a hold in this community! If the epidemic began just after the collection of caterpillars (a very important source of protein in the area), it could be because of them! Conclusion: The trees where the caterpillars are found must be felled!

I asked Pierrot, "How can we fight against poaching in the forest without helping breeders to keep their livestock?" I realised that we absolutely have to be their spokesperson to the Ministry of Agriculture (Responsible for the Republic's veterinary service.) and also alert the Ministry of the Environment and Nature Conservation. Luckily for the province of Equateur, the political authorities responsible for these two ministries are native to the Equateur!

With the help of the local officials (the youngest of which must be about 60 years old but to my utter joy are very "administrative"!) I gathered copies of all their reports to give to the Ministers in person. We collected the archives, their notes, and their complaints, which due to the lack of a postal service were to reach Kinshasa far too late for any action to be taken!!! And all this in offices, which have suffered 16 years of

misery, war and pillage... without doors, sometimes no roofs, equipped with furnishings, which you can't even begin to imagine!

And such poverty pushes people to do dangerous things. The decrease in the price of pork at the market tempts the consumers! Throughout the days I saw these scared and uncomfortable pigs tied up on the racks of the "Toleka" (taxi-bicycles). Destination: The market, the owners still hoped to sell them. It may have been that the remainder of the livestock has already succumbed to the epidemic... what carelessness! The past 30 years have taught us that viral mutations can lead to us being affected: AIDS, Ebola, SRAS, even bird flu are all examples which have not yet reached these people who are ignorant to the current reality! Once again I was to question yet more authorities in Kinshasa: The Minister of Health, the Minister of Social Affairs and a friend, the Professor J.J. Mayembe from the INRB (National Institute for Biomedical Research) who was already facing the epidemics of Ebola and "Monkeypox" in the province of Kasai... "But dear Professor, know that here, near Waka, Monkeypox is also present, certainly due to the current boom in poaching!!!"

I wondered whether the presence of the young demobilised troops (supposedly unarmed) could be an important factor influencing the fact that I had received three baby bonobos from this region? When you add to that the fact that there is a total lack of sources of protein due to the epidemics affecting the pigs and poultry since the beginning of the year... soon even the dogs in the area will become endangered! The Gombes, one population in Basankusu, informed me that the Mongos (a forest dwelling population also found in large numbers in Basankusu) are known to be very fond of dog meat... " At least that meat is healthy!" they said without thinking that I could be shocked!

The football team: " The Basankusu bonobos "

Here, there are very few sports that are accessible to the children, apart from street football. They make their footballs using the white sap of the rubber trees in an old abandoned plantation. They are real bobbins



of natural rubber, blown up by mouth and tightly sealed. They are very solid. In fact, they can last several years! Alas, the national championship requires the "International Standards": football shirts, shorts, shin-pads, socks and boots. The founder of the EFOBA (The football school of Basankusu), one of the 12 football teams in the district, decided to create the football team in order to get the youths

involved in something once they left secondary school. I had been invited to go and meet the team and give them a presentation to increase their awareness as to the protection of bonobos, a meeting, which led to the creation of a group of "messengers" spreading the word! But I could see that these messengers also hoped that if the ABC was

settling in an office in Basankusu then maybe they might have a chance of finding a sponsor!

During a later stop-over in Paris, I went to meet Corinne Marchal from Bloomberg, who gave us T-shirts and flasks. But we still had the rest of the equipment to find! Alain Tixier, the director of the feature film "Bonobos", spoke to his wife Brigitte about the situation, as she is very involved in the town hall of Melun. They couldn't promise much, but they were going to try to get a first aid kit from the Melun football squad. (Isn't that where Claude Makelele, the famous football player for the French National team started?) The rest of the equipment, including the printing of the educational slogan onto the team's T-shirts, would be taken on by a project funded by Sea World Busch Gardens in the United States. The colours were chosen: Green for the forest and black for the bonobo.

Overjoyed by the good news, the "Basankusu Bonobos" as they are now known, went on to win the first round. In the Congolese championship they beat the other 11 teams to become the district champions! They then had to go on and go to Bumba for the provincial selection.

Alas, moving a whole team and their trainers, even by pirogue (an eight day trip to Bumba, through Mbandaka), without another reliable source of funds other than hoping on the goodness of a few well-off people... Pierrot rolled his eyes behind his glasses. I was already dreaming of seeing the "Basankusu Bonobos" champions of 'Equateur'... and perhaps even of the Congo!!! And with that, the word "Bonobo" would be shown proudly throughout the territory... "Come on, surely we can try to help them?" said Pierrot, "It is a great education opportunity and we have not yet spent all the money planned for the education program." You don't need much to convince me! And so they were to go to Bumba!

We returned to Lola full of fresh memories of our time spent in Basankusu, but also with a long list of important things to do before we go back again at the end of the month....

Lola's little pink book

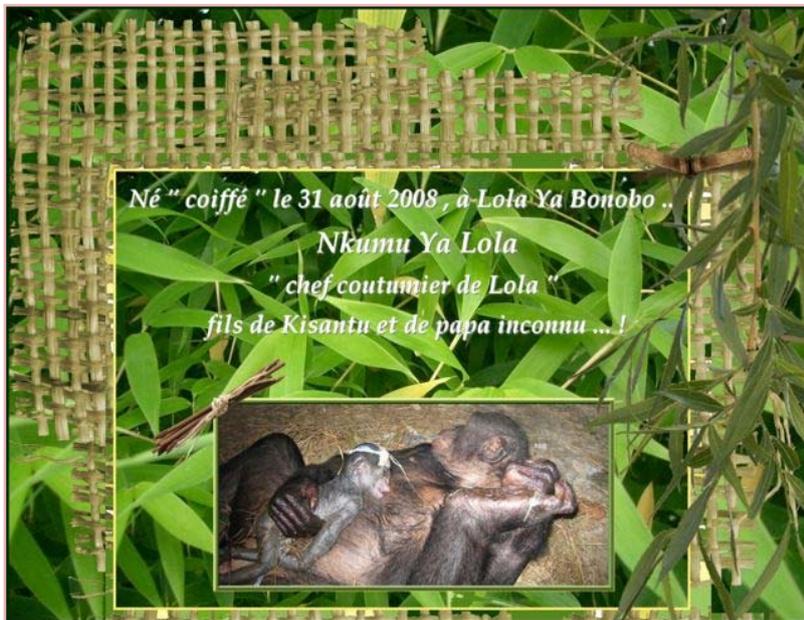
June 28th : Crispin is a dad again!

A handsome little boy weighing 2.9 Kg, called Joseph (but quickly nicknamed Jef) came to complete the lovely little family. Christina, his big sister is overjoyed! Both mother and baby are very well!



But also..... and finally !

August 31st : The birth of " Nkumu ya lola "



Before our departure for Basankusu, over three weeks ago we were already keeping an eye on Kisantu who was expecting. She was enormous! "This baby is going to be a big one!" said Crispin. "Unless it's twins!" we said jokingly, considering the size of the future mother!

Finally, on the 31st of August, Valéry called me in Basankusu: "The baby is here! He is nice and big and

he was born with hair", she said proudly! "It will bring us luck!" I responded. And thinking of the Village chiefs, always with their fancy headdresses, I suggested: "We could call him 'Nkumu ya Lola' (the chief of Lola)". Kisantu was already giving Nkumu all the love and attention he needed, and, as expected, she was plucking off, hair-by-hair, his little 'birth cap'. Sixty-two bonobos? There are now so many in our little paradise that I couldn't help but think how many had been hunted in the forest! Our poor bonobos of the Congo!

New arrivals this quarter

SANDOA

A man claiming to be in the National Marine and having arrived from Bolobo (a town in the province of Bandundu on the left bank of the Congo River, where the presence of Bonobos is confirmed by the WWF) came to my husband's business with a young bonobo in his arms. He explained that he had "confiscated" her (more like "bought") from some bush-meat traders when his boat had docked in Bolobo.



He had hoped he might make a bit of money by selling her in Kinshasa but he had found no buyers! In town, people had suggested he take her to "Maman Bonobo" because it would cost so much to feed her and bonobos are protected by law. Being that the man in question didn't have any means of reaching "Lola ya Bonobo", he simply found my husband! "He must come here!" said Crispin, "This man needs educating!"

Sandoa arrived at Lola on the 2nd of September. She was very small, it seemed that her trip since her capture had not been excessively long, she was in quite good health. Clémence took care of her during her quarantine period, but she soon joined the nursery where she found her new substitute mother, Espérance, who was to be free of little Vanga, then ready to join the big group in enclosure 1.

Tears....

On the 10th of September when I arrived at Lola, Maman Yvonne, in tears, fell into my arms. Her son had just died of a sudden attack of cerebral malaria! Poor Yvonne, who lived alone with her three children!

We tried as we could to help her through her mourning. As usual in these kinds of situations, the staff at Lola, like a big family, stayed at her side.



...and a few laughs at Lola.



But life, as cruel as it can be, does go on. In the nursery, the escapades of Sake also known as "the terror" had our Mamans laughing! "She doesn't miss a single opportunity!" Said Maman Henriette totally surpassed, "She is always ready for the next time!" That's the way in the nursery: new 'leaders' always reveal themselves to us!