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DEDICATED TO THE PEOPLE OF MBOMO





Congo Tales

Told by the People
of Mbomo

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Preface

SABINE PLATTNER

With my parents, I walked, danced, and played in Germany's Black Forest as far back as I can remember. During the long, cold European winters of my childhood, I sat near our AGA stove reading tales of distant, mystical lands and the "dark forests" of the African continent. This curiosity, deeply embedded in the fiber of my being, grew as I heard the stories of courageous researchers working with chimps in those forests. Although I did not know it at the time, in hindsight, I understand that the stage had been set for me to explore the stories of Africa.

As I grew older, I became increasingly interested in ecological conservation. My decision to settle in South Africa brought me closer to exploring the places I had read about in my youth. The stories shared in South Africa continued to fascinate and engage me. After I became a member of the organization Leadership for Conservation in Africa (LCA), my interest focused on the Congo. However, the area alone posed an incredible challenge. Nobody wanted to go there. But this difficulty only made it so that I *had* to see it for myself.

The combined force of the conservation aims in the Congo led by the LCA and the tales I had heard and read since childhood, encouraged me to jump on a plane. In this "heart of Africa," in that "dark forest," I discovered a totally new world hidden from the "modern" world I knew. I met the most incredible people, including members of the Bayaka, once referred to as "pygmies." I watched their plays, listened to their tales, and danced with children who had grown up in the forest of the Congo.

The 1,350,000-hectare "crown jewel" of the Congo Basin rainforests, Odzala Kokoua National Park became *home* to me. With it, my life was enriched. My curiosity and childhood imagination had been met with a fascinating "other" reality.

I believe that the wellbeing of humankind lies in nature and, as such, the rainforest. It is important to combine conservation work with education, specifically with exciting young people about the environment and, simultaneously, the wellbeing of the planet.

If children do not find the importance in our planet's wellbeing than the conservationists of today will never succeed in the world of tomorrow.

I have had the great fortune to be able to follow my curiosity, to take part in and even to create initiatives that foster policies, which enable positive change in places such as the Congo. My personal charity, the Sabine Plattner African Charity (SPAC), has been spearheading projects surrounding early childhood and youth development, fostering community conservation and building research capacity for over a decade. These initiatives have been fundamental for the inspiration of the "Tales of Us" project, and the local educators and representatives of SPAC have enthusiastically contributed with their knowledge and experience.

Tales are powerful, whether you read them by candlelight next to an AGA or, thanks to modern-day technology, on a tablet. Tales also possess the ability to bring people together around important topics. I believe that this project will, through the magic of stories, link children from the extremes of the world. My hope is that this will stimulate curiosity and contribute to a more informed and compassionate understanding, within younger generations, of our responsibility to the world.

Storytelling as a Bridge Between Worlds

STEFANIE PLATTNER
EVA VONK

“When an old person dies, it is as if a library of knowledge burns.”

We first heard this proverb during one of our research journeys to Mbomo. A violent thunderstorm had recently raged through the village, and lightning had struck a large tree in the middle of town. After the storm settled, several families gathered around the fallen tree and started sharing stories; from tales about the founding families of the village who had planted this tree to myths about the magical powers of its roots. An older gentleman who worked as a teacher in the local Kindergarten told us that many of these stories would perish when their narrators die because, so often, there is no way to document them.

When we began this project, we both suffered from the phenomenon so aptly termed by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story.” We had heard of the Congo but knew very little about it. And with so few positive images beyond poverty and plague being delivered in the mainstream narrative about Africa, we wanted to discover it on a more complete and empowered level. By activating the family ties between our film production company and the various initiatives organized by the Sabine Plattner African Charities (SPAC), we hoped to combine our resources to raise awareness about this fascinating place.

Considering ourselves the “midwives” of this project, we travelled whenever we could to Odzala-Kokoua National Park, deep in the rainforest of Central Africa to absorb greater experiences and multifaceted stories that we could present to international audiences. On the day of the thunderstorm, our mission became more defined. Our work should not only be about bringing something from this place to the outside world but to be a bridge between both worlds. And our efforts should also include leaving structures behind for future generations in the Congo and beyond.

During our research journeys, we spent most of our time at Sanza Mobimba, the local kindergarten and youth center founded by SPAC. We felt immensely inspired by the focus of the local teachers on fostering future change. This made it clear that instead of creating a traditional documentary film, we should highlight their work and use our tools to turn the knowledge found in their oral culture into a truer living *library*.

We gained many allies, such as the town’s social worker, the women running the school, and the director of the local radio station. We asked them all to help us collect fables such as those we had first heard next to the fallen tree. As time went on, we started receiving handwritten notepads filled with stories, which the teachers began to use at school for creative workshops with the children.

To ensure that we might tell as many stories as possible, we approached photographer Pieter Henket who has portrayed some of the world’s most iconic individuals through his cinematic, visual storytelling style. Although, because of his previous focus on celebrity and fashion, he is perhaps the last individual one might expect to find in the Congo, his signature style and commitment to telling these peoples’ stories has honored the community in a way we all feel they truly deserve.

This book is the result of a particularly unique project for which several experts from various disciplines, people of tremendous importance to us, donated their time and knowledge over recent years. It is safe to say that this was the most humbling project we have ever undertaken. Stories can alienate or empower. We hope that these stories will serve as a bridge to promote positive change in all directions.

Capturing Tales

PIETER HENKET

My photography is an encounter between my eyes and the eyes of my subjects. Creating a mysterious narrative with a touch of realness. Telling stories with compositions of light and emotions. For as long as I can remember, I have had profound admiration for large-scale, 17th-century painting because of its ability to capture a multi-layered story on a single canvas.

Although I would never compare myself to a painter such as Rembrandt, my fascination with masterpieces such as *The Night Watch* is what drew me to capture the image of some of the most fascinating celebrities of our time. I always loved the dramatic lighting and grandeur with which these great master painters captured their own protagonists.

After honing my photographic style for almost two decades, I managed to find my own visual language to tell stories through portraiture. I am excited to have a platform, through pictures, in order to target matters that deserve being given more thought. The images I created of the *Amsterdam Rainbow Dress*, representing the seventy-two countries where homosexuality is illegal, to raise awareness for gay pride are examples of this. It was a taste of just how powerfully imagery can impact peoples’ perceptions and how I, as an individual, can play a part in that transformation of perception.

The invitation to capture stories from Congo for the *Tales of Us* project has been a true dream. I first encountered the enchantments of Africa while in Tanzania, but I did not know about the mystery and the scale of the Congo rainforest.

Guided by the team with which I was working in Congo, I learned about the local customs. We began our collaboration by carefully deciding on which topics to focus and how to combine their cultural traditions with the cinematic style of my portraiture. With so much to see, so many perspectives to illustrate, and so many angles from which to approach this work, it was a challenge to keep a focus on the frame we had set for ourselves, of stories and myths. It was important to us to approach this project as a playful encounter between our collective imaginations and fantasy, all the while preserving a clear distance from politics and religion.

As a storyteller, this project had everything I could have wished: a beautiful, hidden place, deep in the rainforest where our team spent years collecting the stories of the local peoples. We compared ourselves to the Brothers Grimm, recording and compiling local legends and fairy tales.

Together with my team and the people of Mbomo, we found different ways to tell their stories through my photography — by creating large scale scenes combined with classic, quiet portraits.

During the process of our shoot, the pictures gained additional layers as the people created new, richer tales. Everyone was so incredibly welcoming and generous, and the excitement on their part to have their family stories captured in such an “epic” way was positively motivating for our crew.

Considering the current state of the world, the environment and the various epidemics that our planet faces, I am dedicated to raising awareness about and changing perceptions on this particular part of Africa. I have been honored to bring my craft, technical skills, and creative eye to this project. It is without a doubt one of the most beautiful collections of work I have ever done. By telling their stories, it is my hope that this photographic series will stimulate audiences to learn more about the people of the Republic of Congo.

