

What Do the Protectors of Congo's Peatlands Get in Return?

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February 22, 2022











Beneath these trees ...

... along this river ...

... down this road ...

... lies one of the planet's greatest natural resources ...

... as long as it remains undisturbed.

Headway

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I.

Guardians of the Forest

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Headway is an initiative from The New York Times exploring the world's challenges through the lens of progress.

The old man was furious.

“They threatened me with a gun,” he said, shaking his walking stick at anyone who would listen. “They wanted to shoot me!”

Leaning heavily on that stick, with its perfect kink in the middle, Joseph Bonkile Engobo, 84 years old and hunched, moved with surprising speed past the raffia houses and earthen church of Lokolama, and into the enveloping forest. Two colleagues and I accompanied Mr. Engobo, a traditional chief known to all as Papa Joseph, to the scene of the alleged crime.

Papa Joseph paused in a clearing. It was October, the rainy season in Lokolama, his village in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the humid heat of midday had begun to lift. He pointed his stick at a tangle of leaves and lianas. Through the tangle, at the edge of a swamp, lay the remains of a giant tree. Fresh chips of wood were scattered around its severed stump.

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On this spot, four days earlier, Papa Joseph had come across a logger sawing down some of Lokolama’s biggest and most valuable trees, he said. He knew that the logger was named Guy, and that he had paid a neighboring village for the right to cut down its trees for timber.

But as far as Papa Joseph knew, no one in Lokolama had authorized such services. When he challenged Guy, the logger pulled out a gun.

Luckily for Papa Joseph, a hunter nearby heard the confrontation, came running and stepped in front of the gun, begging for Papa Joseph's life. Guy put his revolver away and left.

Never in all his days had something like this happened in Lokolama, Papa Joseph said. But he felt certain he knew why it was happening now.



Joseph Bonkile Engobo, known as Papa Joseph, near the stump of a tree he had tried to save.

"It's because of the peatlands," he told us.

Lokolama, home to a few dozen families deep in the equatorial forest, sits in a glade on a rough track road. There, the earth can be plowed for fields of cassava. As you walk into the forest, though, the soil turns to mud and swamp. Five years ago, foreign researchers arrived in Lokolama and asked to look at the mud. Bemused, the villagers agreed. The researchers told the villagers that some of the mud in those swamps was just mud, but that other mud — indistinguishable at a glance from the regular stuff — was special. They called it peat and said it contained a remarkable power.

Peat's power is how efficiently it stores carbon. Bogs, muddy swamps and other peatlands make up just 3 percent of Earth's surface but store twice as much carbon as all the world's forests. Lokolama's swamps, it turned out, are part of the biggest network of tropical peatlands in the world, covering over 55,000 square miles of Central Africa and storing more than 30 billion tons of carbon. This vast peatland is relatively undisturbed, for now.

What is peat?



Meet Peat, The Unsung Hero of Carbon Capture

But should that carbon vault be opened, it could have catastrophic consequences for the planet. In those peatlands are stored the carbon equivalent of 20 years of U.S. fossil fuel emissions. Roads could be built giving loggers better access to the forest. Politicians could decide to convert peatland into farms. In these scenarios, the peat would dry out and release carbon into the atmosphere and, the researchers warned, become not only endangered but dangerous.

In Lokolama, the peatlands were surrounded by swamps, which made it difficult to haul out felled trees. But even cutting down trees nearby created a risk, as it could start to open up the area to more intensive logging. The threat of deforestation was edging ever closer, brought by people like Guy.



Peat, formed from fragments of ancient branches, leaves, roots and tree trunks, is hidden under dark, filmy water.



From a villager's perspective, selling a tree — like the prized African teak or the dark, durable Wenge — might be one of the few ways to get cash. But the people of Lokolama were willing to abide by the researchers' wishes and keep their trees standing. They would try to protect the peat, even as they wondered what was in it for them.

All the attention on Lokolama's mud, however, seemed to upset relations with their neighbors in Penzele, a village that nestles against Lokolama like the other half of the same avocado seed. Outsiders have long exploited Congo's wealth of natural resources — rubber, diamonds, gold and, most recently, cobalt. While these new outsiders said peat had value only if it remained in the ground, to the people in this region, known as the Cuvette Centrale, the sudden interest suggested someone would be making money. Penzele was almost as poor as Lokolama. Why was Lokolama entitled to it, and not Penzele?

"They got jealous," Papa Joseph said.

Papa Joseph knew who had brought Guy, the logger, to cut down trees, because Guy had let a name slip. It was a curious name, but one that Papa Joseph knew well. Mr. Tout Va Bien, whose real name was Joseph Lombo Bokanga. Everything always went well for Tout Va Bien. That's how he'd gotten his nickname, French for "All's Well." He was the richest man in Penzele, with a fence around his property, and a satellite dish, and a huge field of tall cassava plants. He had a thin, faint mustache and his slightly protruding belly suggested he must eat well, people said. They also said he liked the sound of his own voice.

Penzele was proud of him. Lokolama villagers feared him. To them, Tout Va Bien's prosperity and arrogance represented the centuries of prejudice and exploitation Lokolama had endured from its richer neighbor. Though to an outsider Lokolama and Penzele might look like the same humble village, there was an invisible wall, a gaping social gulf, between them.

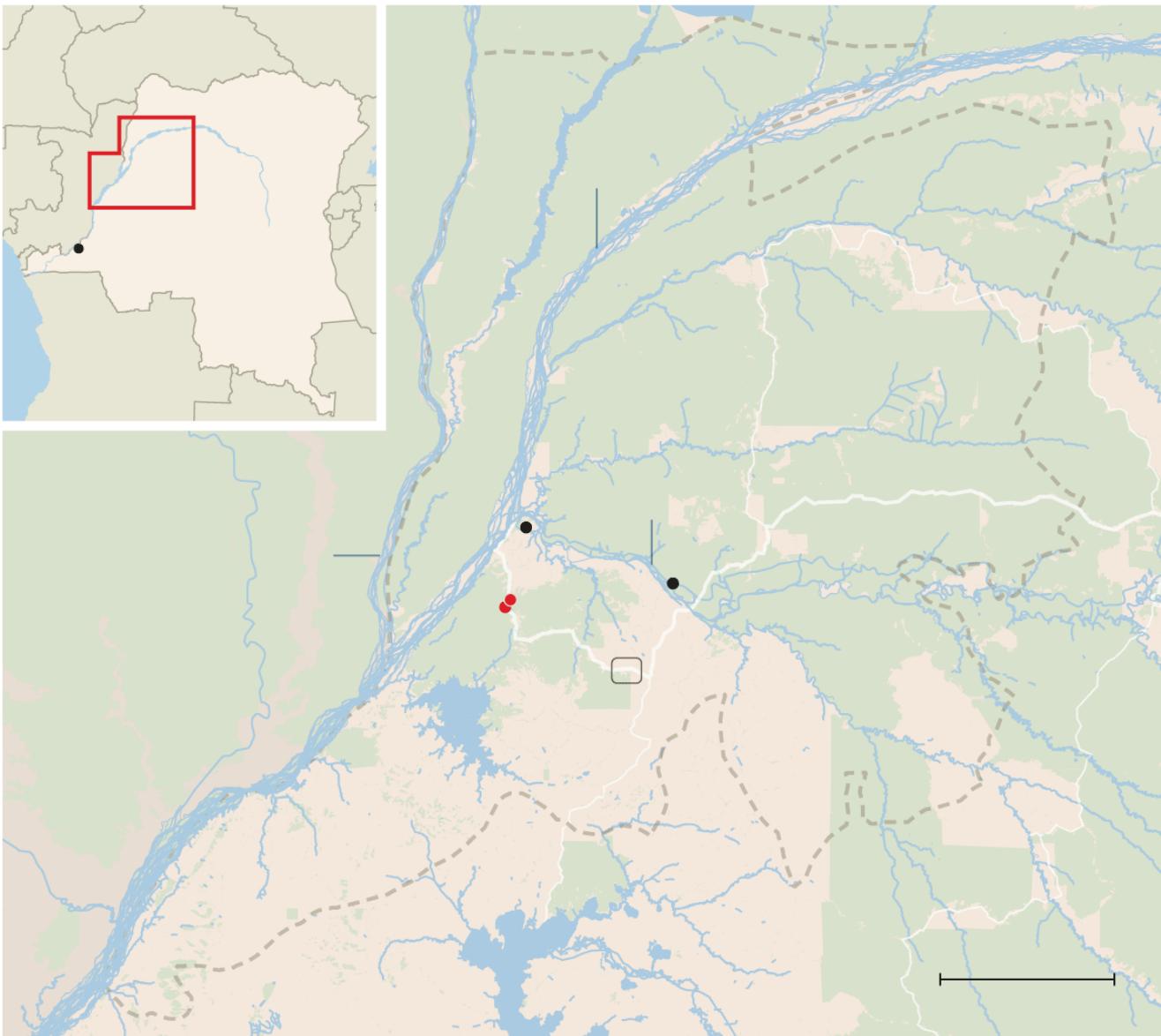




Men gathering around a board game in Lokolama. Below, the chief of Penzele in his doorway. The two towns exist in a delicate balance with each other.

Tout Va Bien and his fellow Penzele dwellers were of Bantu origin. Papa Joseph and the Lokolama people are of the Bachua ethnic group, but first introduced themselves to us as pygmies — an often derogatory term used for oppressed, traditionally hunter-gatherer communities in Central Africa. They had always been treated with contempt by their neighbors. In the past, the Lokolama people explained, they had been forced to work in Penzele fields.

These days, there was no forced labor. Time and education had brought more harmony between the villages. Occasionally, Penzele people even married Lokolama people. But there was still prejudice. The children of Lokolama were not welcome at the well-built brick school that Penzele's children went to, for example, and studied instead in a flimsy shack of bamboo and palm fronds.



The discovery of the peatlands upset the delicate balance. Papa Joseph told us that Tout Va Bien had been heard boasting that he had a map to prove that Penzele, not Lokolama, owned the peatlands.

Guy acknowledged cutting down Lokolama's trees and admitted he had a gun, but denied pointing it at Papa Joseph. After their altercation, tension between the villages suddenly escalated. Papa Joseph received a summons that seemed to confirm his worst fears. His presence was requested by a local government representative. He had been accused of illegally occupying land and of threatening someone with death. A death threat, he sputtered, when the gun had been pointed at him!

But Papa Joseph was not easily cowed. He was one of the first in Lokolama to attend school as a child, and, despite his age, still worked as a teacher in the nearest city. Tout Va Bien was an upstart half his age. Papa Joseph planned to appeal to the authorities of Équateur Province.

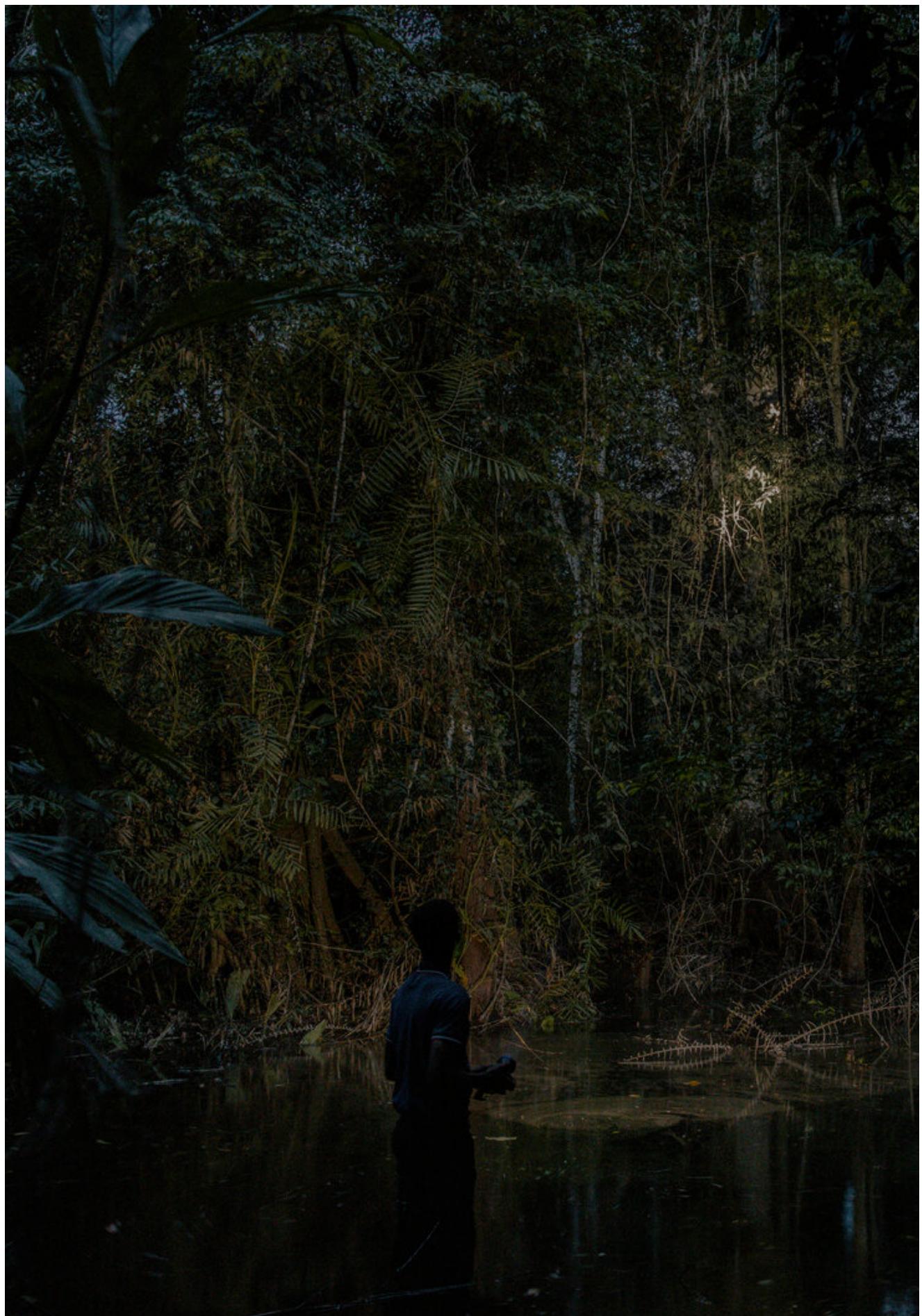
"We are the guardians of the forest," Papa Joseph said indignantly.

He knew how serious this was. Lokolama's very existence was at stake. The accusation that the people of Lokolama were illegally occupying their own village meant that they risked being thrown off their land. Then all the trees in the forest and the world-famous peatlands would belong to Penzele.



II.

Entoku





Back in 2012, some British and Congolese scientists scrutinized satellite images of the Congo Basin. They saw areas that appeared to be waterlogged all year round and contained either hardwood trees or a certain type of palm. These were exciting clues to the existence of peat underneath. Greta Dargie, a geographer then doing her Ph.D. at the University of Leeds, started planning a trip to the Congo Basin to confirm their suspicions.

In 2017, after five years of wading through swamps and checking measurements, Ms. Dargie and the other researchers published their findings in the scientific journal Nature. They had found a vast store of carbon that cut across the two Congos — the Republic of Congo, where the researchers had begun their search, and its massive neighbor, the Democratic Republic of Congo.

It was an astonishing discovery of previously unmapped peatlands, which have since been described as a unique treasure that held more carbon than the rainforest that towered over them. But peat is valuable as a carbon store only if it stays in the ground, untouched. What has partly kept the peat locked up is the absence of roads or other infrastructure — the absence, in other words, of economic opportunity for the people who live there. In this part of the country, outsiders struggle to get in and insiders struggle to get out.

The researchers wanted to keep studying the peatlands. But British scientists couldn't just show up in the Congolese rainforest with their rubber boots and their instruments and expect to go looking. They needed the permission of communities like Lokolama, not to mention their guidance. The paths through the muddy swamps were not easy to discern. So they recruited a biology student at a Congolese university to help them navigate the physical and cultural terrain.



Ovide Emba, at home in Mbandaka, has become a student of peat.

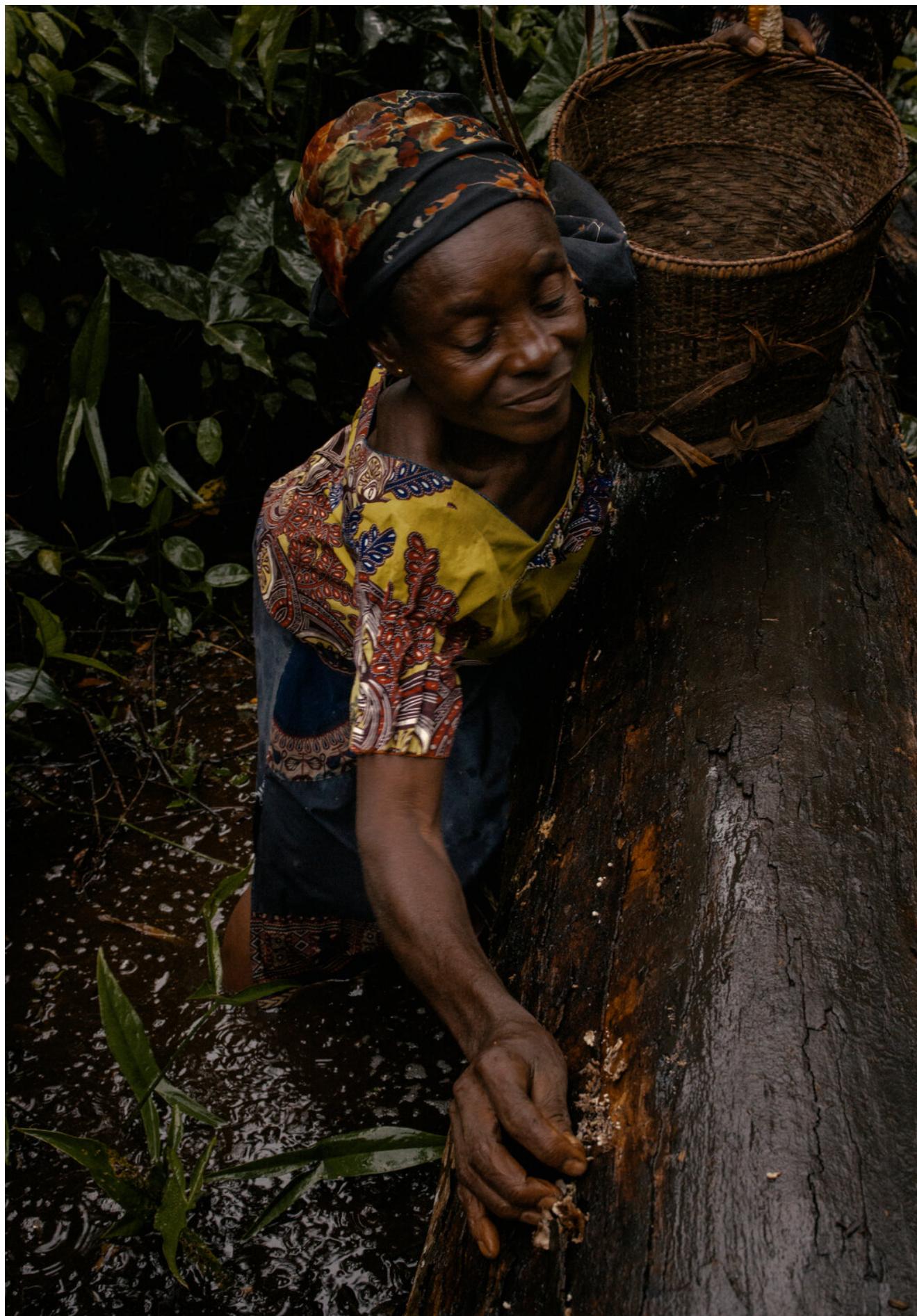
The student, Ovide Emba, lived with his mother and siblings in Mbandaka, a riverside city of decaying Belgian colonial buildings and a million people. He spent much of his time in the science lab at his university, but he knew and loved the forests that surrounded Mbandaka, too.

Mr. Emba quickly became an important member of the researchers' team. He learned how to measure the depth of the peat every quarter kilometer and to measure the methane and carbon dioxide gas the peat produced to see whether it might be decomposing. He learned to dig out perfect half-cylinders of soft, dark samples for transportation to the United Kingdom, where the carbon would be measured. He decided to write his university thesis on the subject, becoming Congo's first-ever student of peat.

Last October, as Mr. Emba put the finishing touches to his thesis, our small team arrived in Mbandaka to report on the peatlands. I am the West Africa bureau chief for The New York Times and had come with Nanna Heitmann, a Russian-German photographer, and Caleb Kabanda, a Congolese journalist who has worked on countless documentaries and investigations. We had asked Mr. Emba to show us how he took gas samples, and he brought us to Lokolama's peatland, one of the areas he was writing his thesis about.

The peatland itself began less than two miles from the village. We set out into the humid forest at midday, feeling as if we had plenty of time ahead of us. At first, the paths, though muddy, were passable enough that I could still look up while walking and take note of the light filtering through giant elephant ear plants, the strings of leaves across my path like tiny lime-green bunting, the quiver of a turquoise butterfly.







Until recently, people from Lokolama frequently went to the peatlands to fish, hunt and collect mushrooms.

But soon we hit swamp. Here, the path was made of wobbly logs, trees that Lokolama folk had pushed over large, murky ponds that might be ankle-deep, or might be capacious enough for dwarf crocodiles.

Mr. Emba, a passionate chorister in his free time, hummed the tenor line of Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus and conducted an imaginary choir as he sauntered easily down the rickety logs. The Lokolama residents we passed, barefoot and carrying huge handwoven baskets full of palm kernels, firewood and cassava leaves, sprang lightly from tree to tree. But we had not accounted for my clumsy, slow-moving efforts. By the time we reached the peatland three hours later, soaked in sweat, we had time for one glance before turning around to try to make it back to Lokolama before 6 p.m., when night falls at the Equator. A drenching rainstorm and the forest's dim understory complicated the return. We spent the last hour edging blindly along slick logs, boots full of muddy water, holding hands for balance.

A couple of days later, we tried again, this time setting off much earlier and with an entourage. The journey to the peatlands was too strenuous for Papa Joseph these days, but Yomi Bonyele, the hunter who said he had stepped in front of Guy's gun, came with us, along with five women who planned to show us their fishing techniques. One of these was a kindly woman named Therese Bokinga, whom Mr. Emba called his "village mom." She looked after him on his trips to the village, fetching and heating water so he could bathe, and preparing the purplish safou fruits she knew he liked.

The villagers had only recently learned the word "peatlands" from Mr. Emba and the other researchers. They had a different name for the swamps. They knew them as Entoku.

Entoku, the villagers said, meant "the big mud where those who go in disappear." They sensed it was a supernatural place where the presence of the ancestors was palpable.

We arrived for the second time at the edge of Entoku. The peat, formed of fragments of ancient branches, leaves, roots and tree trunks, was mostly hidden under dark, reflective water. Bubbles occasionally rose to its filmy surface. Around the roots of the trees that shot up to the canopy in search of light, a newer, top layer of peat was forming, bouncy from millions of little golden roots. It smelled fresh and earthy.

A leaf spun down from the canopy, snagged on a vine and settled under a tree — ready to become particles of peat. Nothing else moved. But the sounds were reverberant. In this forest cathedral was another chorus for Mr. Emba to enjoy — one of millions of insects, birds, and

the occasional scuffle of a monkey overhead. The glorious music, together with the thick, wet air, gave me a strange sensation of being underwater, as if I were swimming in another realm.



Fishing in a peatland pond.

One of the women, dressed in skinny jeans and carrying a red bucket, plunged into a peat-lined pool. She sloshed through the water, brushing vines aside and bending down to tie tiny hooks to submerged tree roots. In just a few minutes, she'd caught three whiskery fish. Mrs. Bokinga laid fallen palm leaves on a tiny island surrounded by swamp, and in one of the wettest environments imaginable, started a small fire. The five women sat around it, delicately eating grilled fish with their fingers.

Until recently, the peatlands had been constantly in use in this way, Papa Joseph told us. "We went to fish there," he said. "We collected mushrooms there. We set traps to catch wild boar, turtles, antelopes, monkeys, porcupines, pangolins and snakes."

Not now. Not since they had been told to protect them. "They tell us about climate change," Papa Joseph said, referring to the researchers who had visited. "They say the peatlands absorb the heat to store it underground. If we destroy them, it will be a disaster. The world will explode." With this scenario in mind, and unsure what the delegations of scientists,

officials and activists meant by “protecting” peat, the elders had instructed villagers to steer clear of Entoku, except for special occasions like a visit from Mr. Emba. Catching fish there was a rare treat.

Standing knee-deep in the dark water, Mr. Emba laid out his gas collection chambers on a bank of forest debris. Beneath his feet, the peat was five feet thick, made up mostly of plant matter that had built up, possibly over thousands of years. As he collected methane and carbon dioxide, Mr. Emba explained what he was doing to Mr. Bonyele, the hunter, a reserved man who stood very upright nearby. Mr. Emba took the cover off the syringe he was using to extract gas, and held it between his lips as he waded to a plastic tub equipped with a valve that he had anchored a few minutes before.

“Do you know what gas is?” he asked Mr. Bonyele, grabbing a palm tree for support.



Ovide Emba makes excursions into peatlands for his research and sometimes brings back peat samples to the lab at the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Mbandaka, where he is a student.



“No, I don’t,” the hunter replied, leaning forward in a watchful pose.

"When the leaves fall, they go into the water and get transformed into mud," Mr. Emba said. "That produces gas."

Mr. Bonyele murmured the words back to him, as if repeating a prayer. Mr. Emba doubted he understood. As the intermediary between the foreign scientists and the residents of peat-adjacent villages, Mr. Emba often ends up trying to explain. But, he said, it's hard to understand such a complicated concept if you've never had even basic education in science.

The idea that peat is a huge carbon store was news to me too. Before I started reporting this story, all I really knew was that my Scottish ancestors used peat to heat their homes, that it made for delicious whisky, and that occasionally the bodies of dead people were found in bogs perfectly preserved. The climate science was not easy to grasp.

Dargie regretted the misunderstandings that followed the discovery of the Central African peatlands. She told me that it was not the researchers' intention to bar the villagers, whose fishing and hunting pose little threat to the peat, from entering the forest. It is logging companies and large-scale development the researchers fear.

And explaining what was special about peat had been a challenge. The science was hard enough to explain, but the years of exploitation by outsiders made people suspicious of their motives. "Understandably, given the history of colonialism," she wrote in an email message, "the assumption can often be that we are there to prospect for oil and minerals. That's why it is essential to have local collaborators like Ovide Emba who can speak the local language and understand local customs."

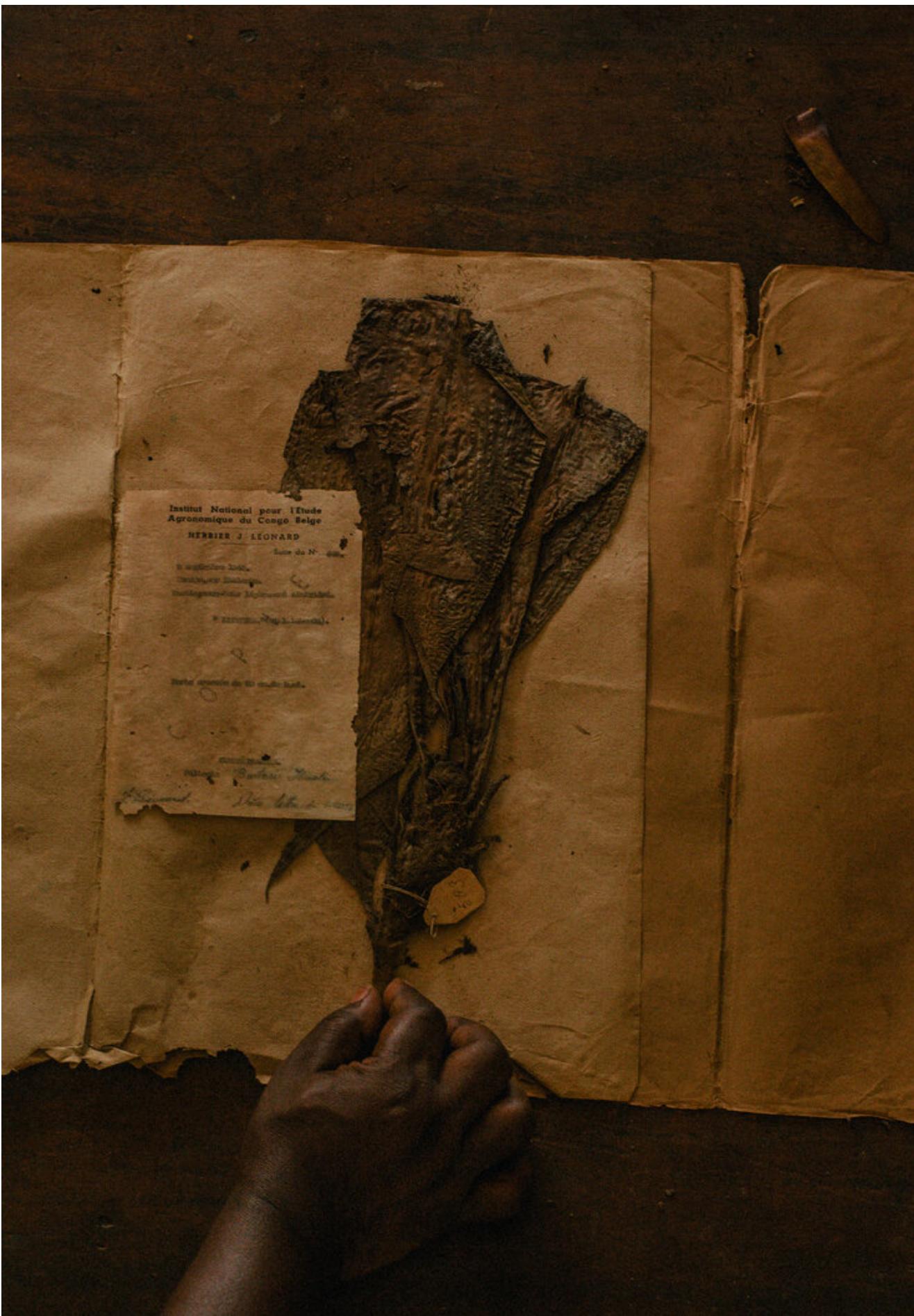
But the task was not easy for Mr. Emba, either. Trying to explain the concept of invisible, but potentially devastating, gases buried in the mud stumped him. One of Mrs. Bokinga's friends had an unusual way of understanding it.

Entoku absorbs all the spirits, good and bad, she said. It was a traditional way of seeing things, Mr. Emba said — and one that he could maybe use in his future explanations.

III.



The Road





A sample from a *Carapa procera* tree dating back to Belgian colonial rule, now in the collection of the Botanical Garden of Mbandaka.

The first time that strange white people showed up in Lokolama was almost a century ago, Papa Joseph and the village elders agreed. Life changed overnight. Leopold II, the king of the Belgians, had grabbed a vast swath of central Africa as his personal fief in 1885. Using the notorious trademarks of his rule, hippopotamus hide whips and casual mass murder, he made a fortune.

The Belgians and their Congolese intermediaries came to Lokolama in 1922 and forced the villagers, among them Papa Joseph's grandfather, to build a road. They ordered the people to abandon their village, then located in the forest near their fishing and hunting grounds, and build new homes by the new road, right next to Penzele.



In the 1920s, Belgian authorities ordered Lokolama residents to build the road where their village now sits.

The road today is a bumpy beaten-earth track that begins in the city of Mbandaka, and plunges into the rainforest. During its 100 years of existence, terrible exploitation has come down the road. The Belgians' henchmen came, demanding that villagers bring them baskets

of wild rubber, paying a few coins or cigarettes and beating those who did not meet the quota.

Later, loggers came down the earthen road. While deforestation has never reached the levels of the Amazon, agriculture, charcoal production and illegal logging, led to a 9 percent increase in deforestation in 2020. And last July, the government lifted a moratorium on industrial logging, raising fears that well-financed concerns could soon exact a heavy toll. Increasingly, timber merchants come down the road that cuts through Lokolama and Penzele, bringing chain saws whose buzz echoes across the forest. Some have the correct permits. Many do not.



People of Congo were forced to gather wild rubber under the rule of Leopold II, King of the Belgians.

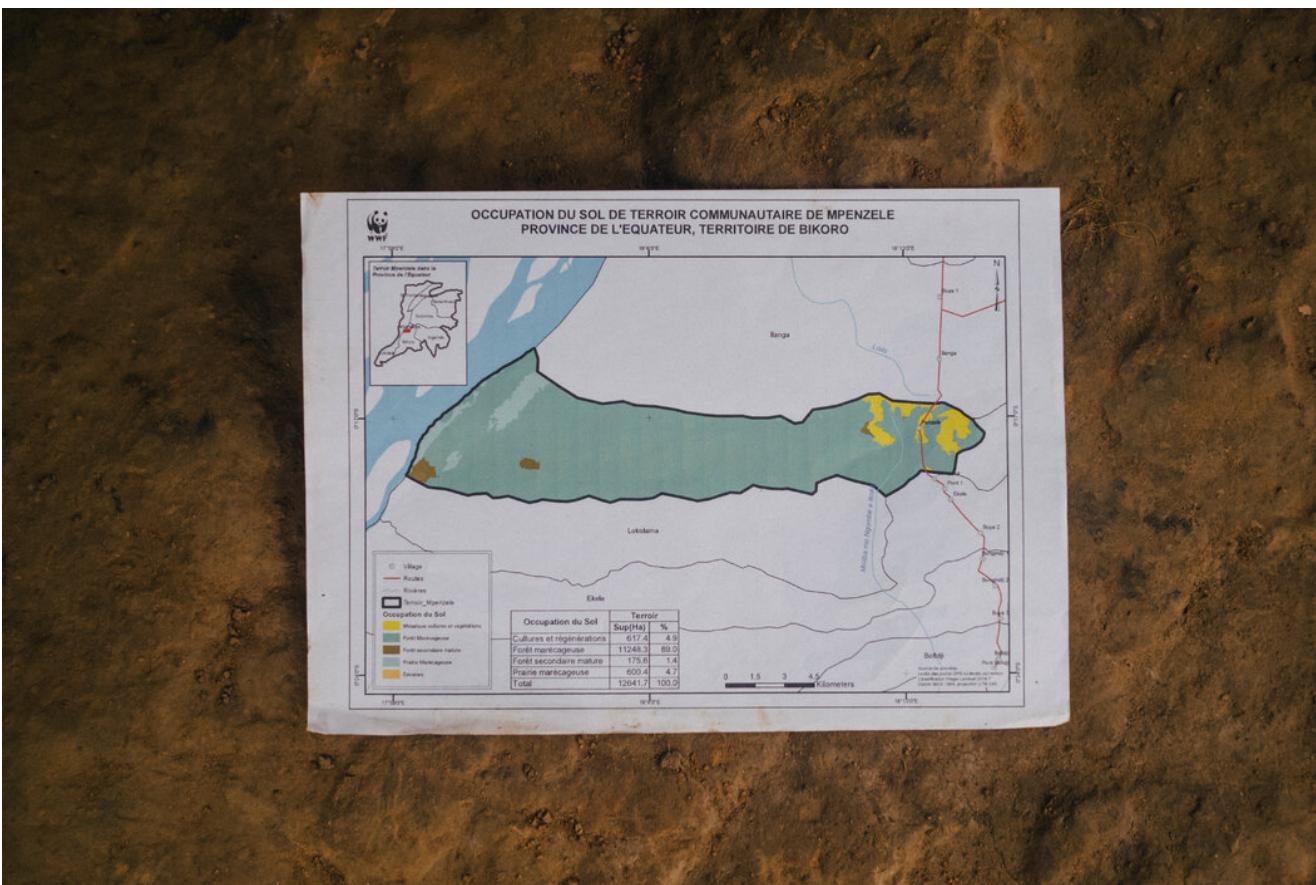
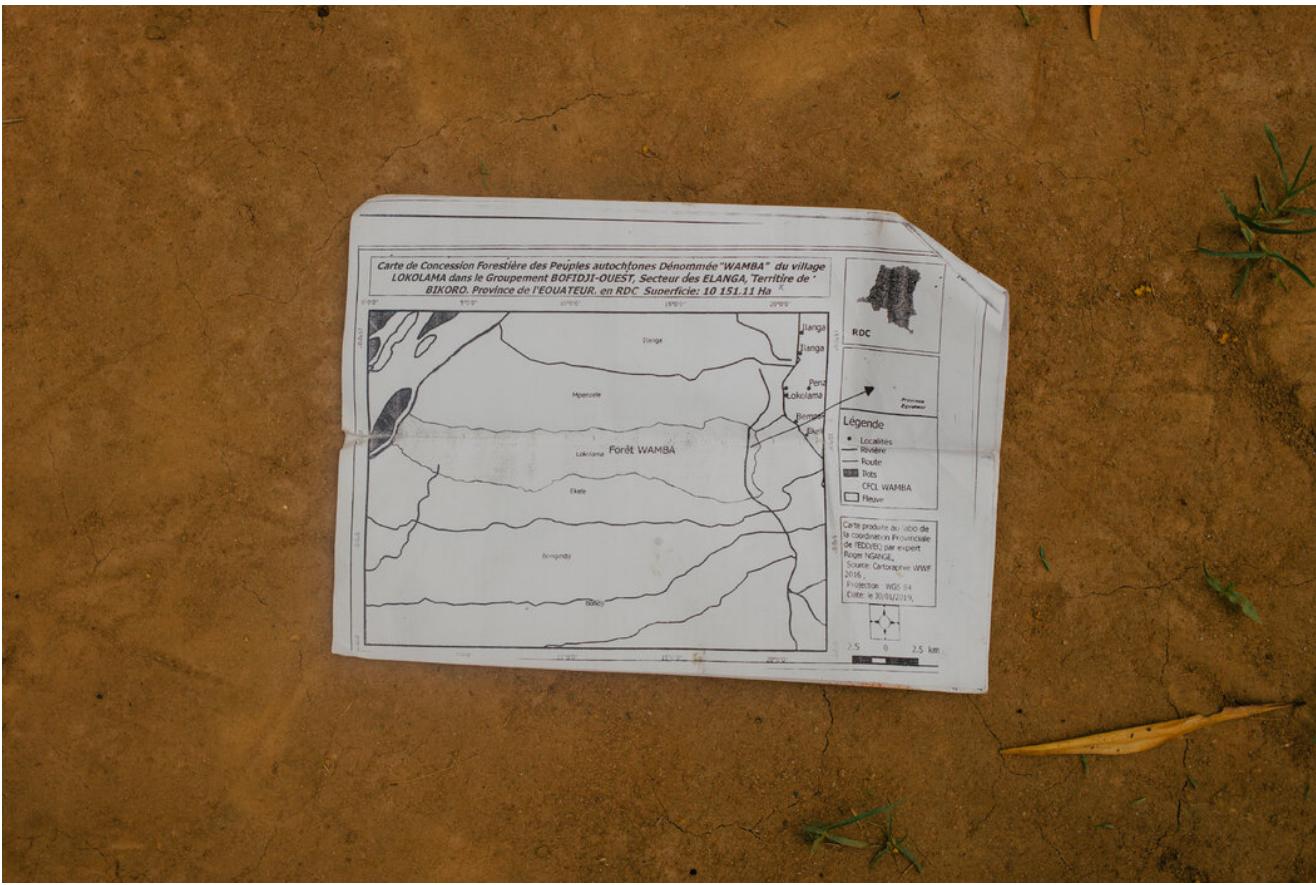
The road to Lokolama brought the good with the bad. It enabled people to carry the game they hunted and the crops they farmed to market. Teachers came down it, too, bringing much-coveted education for the village's children. Around the same time the peat researchers bumped down the road from Mbandaka, so did other people, offering something new: help getting legal ownership of their land.

Before 2016, the forests that surrounded Lokolama and Penzele belonged to the Congolese state. But then the law was changed so that forest communities could apply for titles to land they had occupied for generations, up to around 200 square miles each. Applying is an onerous, time-consuming and expensive process, but studies have shown that when communities have strong legal rights to their lands and government protection, deforestation is significantly reduced.

Representatives from environmental organizations came down the road and informed the villages of their right to the land. One of the first steps a village has to take when applying for title is to draw up a map. Congo covers a vast territory, its people are among the poorest in the world, and conflict in its east has rumbled on for decades, killing millions. Mapmaking is not high on the government's long to-do list. In Lokolama and Penzele, the environmental organizations offered a hand. Greenpeace commissioned a local organization to make a map for Lokolama. And the World Wildlife Fund drew one up for Penzele. Both villages received their titles.



The road from Mbandaka has brought foreigners seeking natural resources. First, the Belgians came for wild rubber; more recently, others, including the Chinese, have eyed the trees for timber. Below, recent maps of Lokolama and Penzele territory.



At first, nobody said that the two maps clashed. But when Lokolama began receiving delegation after delegation talking about the value of the peatlands, Tout Va Bien claimed that Penzele's map proved that his village owned the peatlands.

Papa Joseph and other Lokolama elders claimed that WWF had made the map improperly, consulting only Penzele. In an interview in Mbandaka, WWF representatives strenuously denied this. WWF and the organization Greenpeace commissioned say they consulted both villages in making the maps.



Julien Mathe, whose group helped draw up Lokolama's map, in his office in Mbandaka.

Both villages thought the peat had value, and so were fighting over its ownership, said Julien Mathe, coordinator of the Action Group to Save Man and the Environment, an Mbandaka-based nongovernmental organization. Mr. Mathe's NGO was commissioned by Greenpeace to draw up Lokolama's map. "It's this saga of the peatlands that created the conflict," he said.

The fragile harmony between the two villages was broken.

It was perhaps understandable that the people of Lokolama, the bearers of oral histories about exploitation across generations, would be suspicious of the motives of foreigners. Even Mrs. Bokinga, Mr. Emba's village mom, does not buy his explanation. She thinks they must be taking something. "Something like diamonds," Mrs. Bokinga said.



Therese Bokinga, with her husband, lives in Lokolama and looks after Mr. Emba, the researcher, when he visits.

Near the road, Mrs. Bokinga set out a few small piles of orange Scotch bonnet chiles on a rough wooden table to sell to passers-by. They might make her a few cents, nowhere near what she needed to pay for things like her children's school fees and notebooks.

It wasn't clear to her whether the arrival of the peat researchers would bring something good, like schools, or something less desirable. Perhaps the world-famous peatlands would somehow bring monetary gain and change their lives, she thought. But perhaps the rumors were true and the samples foreign researchers said they took were a cover for stealing whatever valuable, mysterious commodity the land contained.

"White people," she said, "don't come for nothing."

IV.



**'Tired of their Visits,
Tired of their Promises'**



A road, even a bumpy one, is rare in the rainforests of Congo. Many of the places where peat has been found, like the village of Mpeka, are reachable only by boat. Few of the people in those areas, Mr. Emba said, have heard of scientific researchers or of climate change.

To get to Mpeka, our group traveled in a metal-topped speedboat about 100 miles down the reddish-brown Ruki River, and then further into a lazy tributary where we found a waterside hamlet on stilts.

Not long after we arrived, the chief of Mpeka slid up in a canoe and strode up the sandy path to the heart of the village, where women tended a fire. Wearing a gray tracksuit, slides and a large goldtone watch, Chief Jean-Paul Ikolongo Sefala Yekay greeted us with a gift of a bucket of fish, as tradition demands. But once we had settled into plastic chairs under the low beams of one of the houses on stilts, he embarked on an angry speech. Mr. Emba had brought researchers there often, Mr. Yekay said, but never with the gifts he had requested — a motorboat and a new roof for the school, which had recently collapsed in a storm.



Jean-Paul Ikolongo Sefala Yekay, seated, the chief of the riverine village of Mpeka.

"They just come and take what they take, cheat us and go," he said. Mr. Yekay addressed Caleb and me, but his words were directed at Mr. Emba, the only researcher present, who sat low to one side in a handmade chair. "We're tired. Tired of their visits, tired of their promises."

After an hour of this, Mr. Emba tried to explain. "We never promised you anything," he said. As he had told the chief several times, he had recorded the village's needs, but the researchers couldn't offer gifts; their role was limited to studying peat.

The chief was not mollified. The researchers wanted something — they took samples of the mud — and should offer something in return.

Mr. Emba got up and walked around to take a breather from the admonishments. He stopped to watch children steering in and out of the tiny harbor in slender canoes. He wished the Congolese government would help support the communities where peat had been found. "It's all on the researchers," Mr. Emba said.

Though the researchers were the first strangers to reach Mpeka, others are most likely not far behind. These visitors will bear chain saws and cash.

On the way back down the great Congo River to Mbandaka, we passed thousands of logs on their way out of the forest. They were slung together to form giant rafts to make the long journey to Kinshasa, the capital.





All along the Congo River are signs of deforestation: rafts made of logs lashed together on their way to Kinshasa (top) and a village near the peatlands.

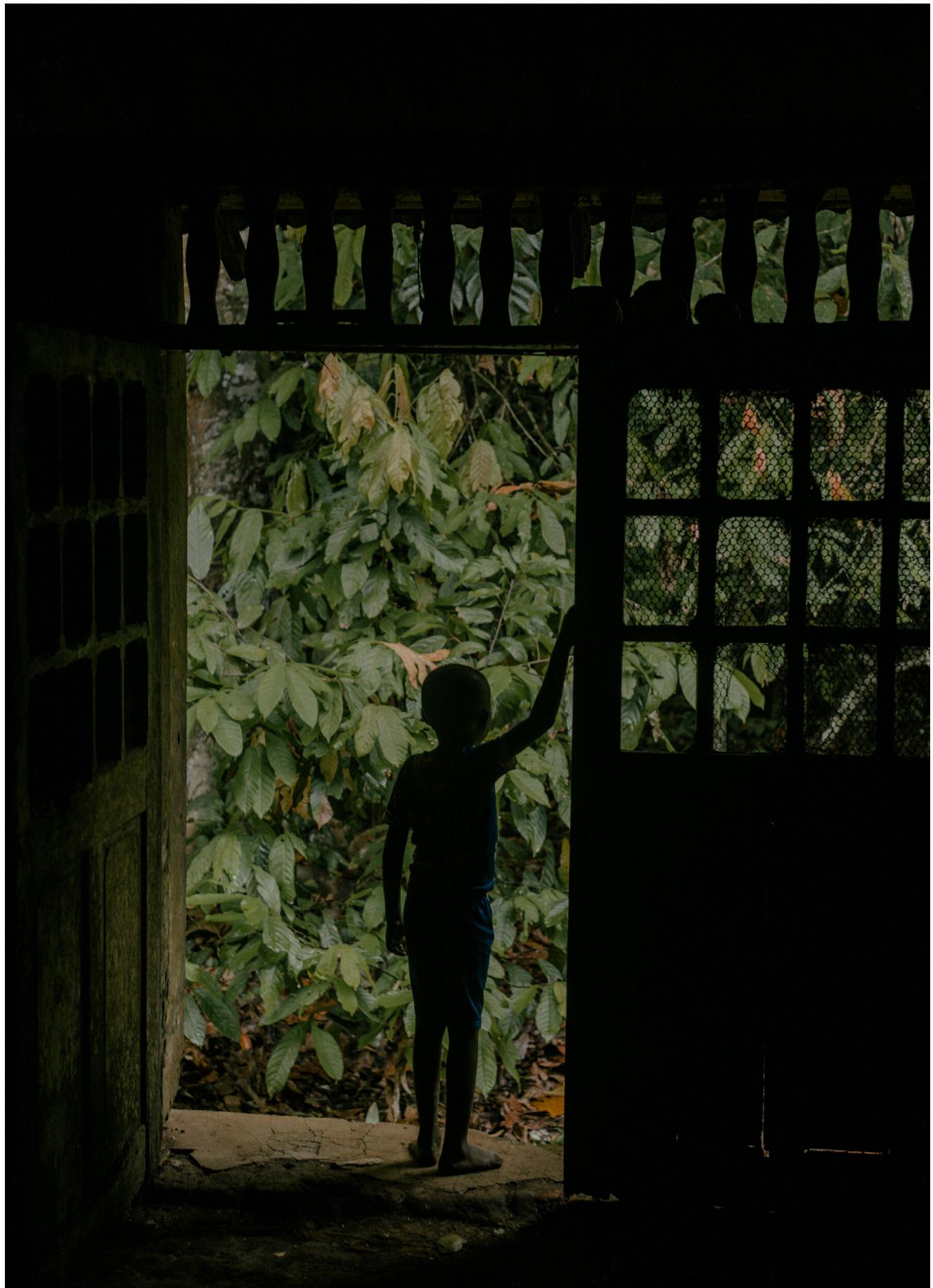
One evening, as we were having dinner at our Mbandaka hotel, we noticed two Chinese men at a table across the terrace, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. We struck up a conversation, though it was halting as they spoke little French and we no Chinese. But a Congolese official who sat with them and had facilitated their trip explained that they were businessmen fresh from a week in the rainforest. They were celebrating deals they had made to buy trees from several villages not far from Lokolama.

They beamed as they showed us videos on their cellphones of villagers whose trees they'd bought. In the videos, the villagers were dancing, singing and asking them to stay longer.

V.



'Everyone Will Die'



In Penzele, some village elders sat under a raffia shelter in a brewing storm, grumbling about “Penzele’s pygmies,” who, they said, didn’t know their place. The peatlands belonged to Penzele and not Lokolama, there was consensus on that. But when it came to what peatlands actually were, things got fuzzy.

Someone mentioned leaves. Someone else mentioned diamonds. Was “peat” just another word for forest?

A man with a gold chain, a luscious beard and twice the girth of most of the villagers lowered himself into a plastic chair. It was Guy Mampuya, the logger who Papa Joseph had said threatened him with a gun. He lived in Mbandaka but was staying in Penzele while he cut down trees.



Guy Mampuya, a logger from Mbandaka, in Penzele. There are large trees on the peatlands that interest him.

“Peatlands, peatlands,” he said. “Everyone talks about peatlands, but in reality, no one understands a thing.”

For now, Penzele would not let him near the peatlands, Guy said, but he was hopeful that later, when the researchers lost interest, that could change. Large trees in that direction interested him.

There was one man who understood the peatlands, the elders said. They pointed to his house. But he had gone to the forest.

As if on cue, a tallish man in a straw hat, sodden wet from the rain, emerged from the trees. His eyebrows were expressive and unusually regular, as if drawn on with a marker. His movements were unhurried.

It was Tout Va Bien.



Joseph Lombo Bokanga, known as Tout Va Bien, is the richest man in Penzele. Trees protect the peatlands. “So if we don’t cut them down,” he asks, “what can we expect from the world in return?”

Someone leapt up and gave him their chair. He frowned when he heard that the elders were confused about peat, and offered a precise explanation.

“Peat is an ecosystem,” he said. “It’s a kind of mud. Flowers and leaves fall down and do not decompose for many years. Not all swamp forests are peatlands. It absorbs pollution out of the air and stocks it inside the humidity.”

He barely paused for breath.

“In environmental terms, it sequesters carbon and it filters the water that goes to the Congo River. It stabilizes the climate. In economic terms, it has an impact: It produces many animals, fish and trees. Inside, there are also spirits — that’s where we get our traditional power.”

He hadn’t finished.

“The Congo Basin’s peatlands are the world’s lungs. People say if the world exists, it’s because Congo is breathing. And Congo is breathing from Équateur Province, and especially where you find peatlands, and especially Penzele.”

Like Lokolama, Penzele had been instructed to protect the peatlands. And, Tout Va Bien claimed, Penzele’s survival also depended on those peatlands.

As he spoke, the elders of Penzele shifted their handmade chairs to avoid the rain pouring through the holes of their raffia shelter.

What they said in Lokolama was true: Tout Va Bien was the richest man in Penzele. But that just meant he had a bigger field than most and a cellphone. His house was the best for miles around. But that just meant it was made of bricks, not sticks and mud, and had a metal roof, not thatch.



A church in Penzele.

Penzele was a bit better off than Lokolama. But it was still a poor village. The inhabitants of both lacked basic things. Sound roofs. Boots. Electricity.

The villages and their needs had never attracted any outside attention. Now they had attention, but on the mud, not the people. Nonetheless, Tout Va Bien saw a way out of poverty for Penzele in the world's concern with keeping carbon in the ground. They had leverage now.

"If we cut down the trees, the peatlands will let go of their carbon and it will destroy the world," he said, and he paused long enough for an ominous crack of thunder to ring out across the rainforest. "So if we don't cut them down, what can we expect from the world in return?"

It reminded me of something Papa Joseph had said a few days before. He had asked whether Lokolama would be paid for protecting the peatlands. And then, playing to the crowd of villagers around us, he had smiled, shrewdly, as if he were in the middle of a negotiation.

If Lokolama were not to be paid, he said, "We will destroy them so everyone will die."

Both villages — and others across the region — felt as if they were being asked by people far better off than them to make sacrifices to protect the peatlands. So who should pay?

Tout Va Bien had some thoughts.

“As you can see, we have nothing here that pollutes,” he said, gesturing at the houses of clay, bamboo and thatch, some without doors.

Then he pointed at Nanna and me. “*They* are the big polluters!”

He laughed loudly, but he was serious. We had flown halfway across the world, probably using more carbon to get to Penzele than the village had used in a whole year.

“They keep polluting, and ask *us* to protect the peatlands,” he said. “They must think carefully.”

He began counting nations off on his fingers.

“The British, the French, the Belgians, the Italians, the Chinese, the Japanese, the Americans,” he said. “They are the polluters. And they are the ones who have to pay.”



'The way they are logging is murder'





Papa Joseph climbed off the motorcycle and sank onto a plastic chair in front of Lokolama's church. He had just returned from Mbandaka, and his face spoke his disappointment. He had been to the relevant government agency, the Provincial Coordinator of the Environment and Sustainable Development, to see if Guy had a permit to log in the area, and to the prosecutor's office, to open an investigation into the felling of Lokolama's trees and his being threatened with a gun. But no official would help him.

The environment officials had demanded \$140, he said, just to check whether Guy had the correct documents. The prosecutor would not send anyone to Lokolama to investigate unless Papa Joseph handed over \$80.

He had \$50.

"The environmental authorities just fold their arms," he said. "They're supposed to protect the forest. They do nothing."

If Guy and Tout Va Bien could cut down Lokolama's trees with impunity, that did not bode well for either Lokolama or the peatlands. Guy himself had expressed interest in the huge old trees that grew there. The crescendoing buzz of chainsaws in the forest would surely continue.

"We don't have the money to protect the peatlands," he said. "It's not our fault. We want to protect it, but we don't have the means."



Papy Ecate Ekofo, the minister of environment for Équateur Province, in Kinshasa, where he was trying to get government funds to rein in illegal logging.

Last November, at COP 26, the United Nations' most recent climate meeting, rich nations along with the Bezos Earth Fund, pledged \$1.5 billion to protect the Central African peatlands and the rainforests on and around them. A lot of that money, administered by the Central African Forests Initiative trust fund, will be channeled through international organizations. From there it will make its way to local projects tackling various aspects of deforestation and, in some cases, even to forest communities with approved plans to manage their land sustainably. But even with all that money, the economic situation in Congo means deforestation is likely to continue.

[More from Headway](#)

Who Will Profit From Saving Scotland's Bogs?

While in Mbandaka, I kept trying to meet with Papy Ecate Ekofo, the minister of environment for Équateur Province, where most of Congo's peatlands are located. I wanted to ask him about Papa Joseph's allegations. But the minister was in Kinshasa, where he, in turn, had spent a fortnight trying to meet with his boss, the national minister of environment, to ask her to allocate Équateur more money.

When I finally caught up with Mr. Ekofo in Kinshasa at the end of my trip, he acknowledged that there was corruption in the system, and said he was trying to address it in the agency that awards logging permits.

He pledged to travel to Lokolama as soon as he could to try to resolve the dispute over the rival maps from Penzele and Lokolama. But the promise came with a shrug; there was little money in his budget to enforce land rights.

More troubling to Mr. Ekofo was the danger that loggers posed to the Congolese forest and peatlands. Loggers can get permits to buy trees from forest villages, but they rarely stick to permitted logging areas or to the types and age of trees they can take. “The way they are logging is murder,” he said. “If they continue to log like this, the peatlands will be destroyed.”

The Congolese state is notorious for inaction, and Mr. Emba dreaded the future for his beloved peatlands. “If the state does nothing, in 50 years’ time, I don’t even want to imagine,” he said. “If there were people who cared,” he added, but then his voice trailed off.



Papa Joseph, squeezed between a motorcycle driver and his brother, sets off for Mbandaka.

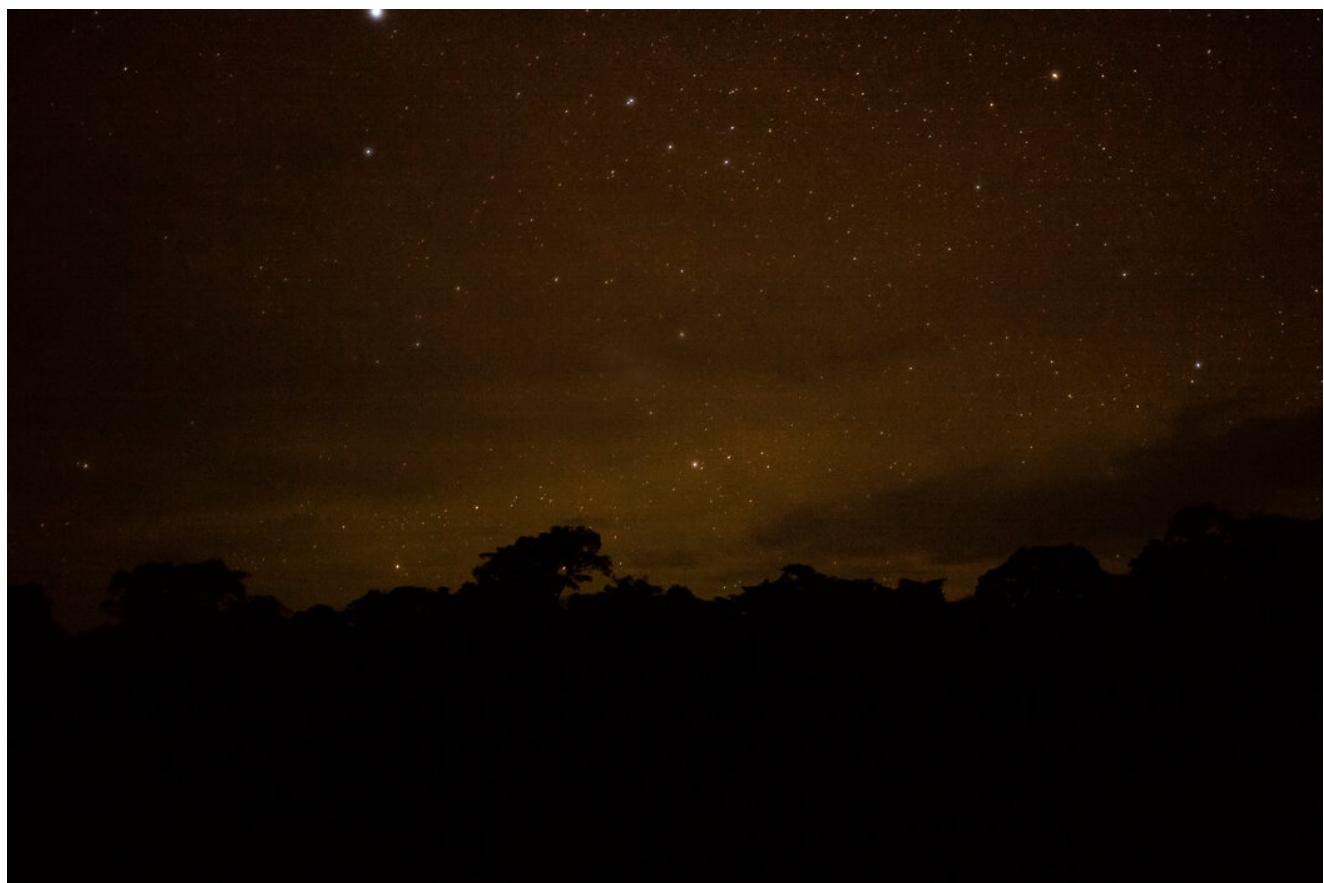
Papa Joseph had not lost all hope for Lokolama or the forests, but he wasn’t counting on anything. He recruited his younger brother to go with him to help argue Lokolama’s case. As he prepared to return to the environmental authority, he started half-practicing his plea. “We

don't have money. Can they accept the little we have?" He climbed onto the back of a motorcycle, sandwiched between his brother and the driver, ready to make their way down the road.

Papa Joseph had heard that Guy, the logger, had been seen in government offices in Mbandaka. Papa Joseph was suspicious of Guy's intentions, and as it turned out he had reason to be. Surprisingly, Guy agreed to meet us in Mbandaka. We sat together at dusk on the terrace of our hotel by the Congo River. We watched unwieldy log rafts, barges belching smoke, and wisps of canoes float by. Guy acknowledged that the environmental authority had called him in. They wanted to see all kinds of documents. He didn't need to produce any of them. "How much to settle all of it?" he told us he had asked. He paid the requested \$200.

Soon, Guy would move a mile or so down the bumpy track that cuts through Lokolama and Penzele, and begin cutting down trees in a new village. But first, he had a week's logging left to do in Penzele.

He said good night, pushed out his chair, and walked off the hotel terrace and into the night. Early the next morning, he would return to the forest.



The night sky in the Cuvette Centrale.



What do you think will happen next?

There are multiple paths the story of Lokolama, Penzele and peatlands throughout the world could take. We welcome you to reflect on what you just read about the villagers of Lokolama and Penzele, their peatlands and their future. What do you think will happen next? Tell us. And in a year, we'll follow up with you to see how the future played out.

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