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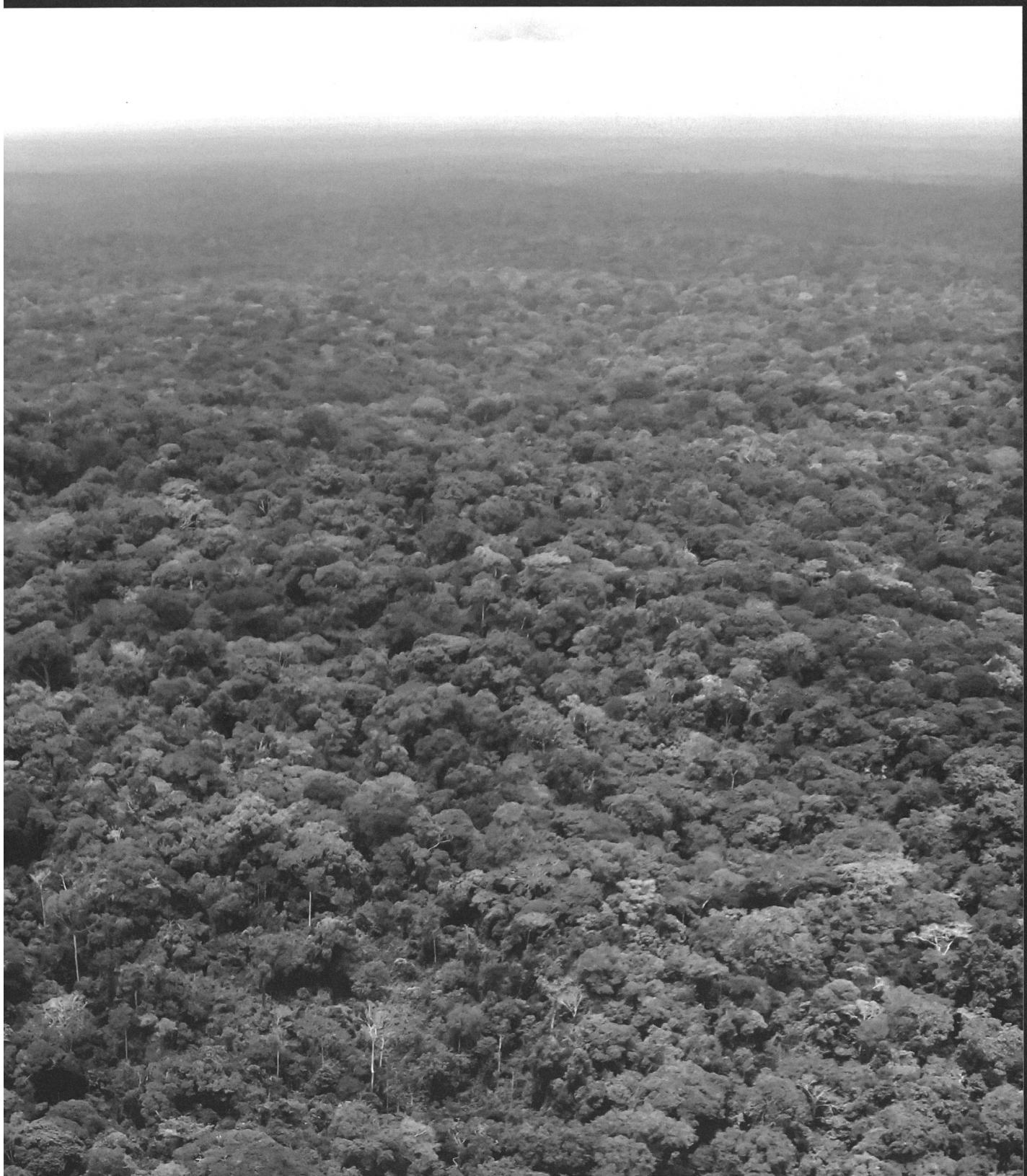
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MBUTI VISUALS

PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE ITURI FOREST
(DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO)

Text and Photos: Reto Kuster





From above, the Ituri forest in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaïre) appears as an endless green carpet of trees, obstructing the view into the world below the forest canopy (cover photo). Seen from an outsider's perspective, this image may provoke feelings of fear and isolation, conjuring up Western notions of wilderness, impenetrable jungle and Joseph Conrad's «Heart of Darkness». Yet, below the canopy, the forest is well-structured: a web of trails and forest camps are used by Mbuti net-hunters¹, village farmers, traders, rangers, army deserters and people looking for ivory and gold².

Of the social anthropologists who have carried out field-work in the Ituri forest, Colin Turnbull has most strongly shaped the image of the Mbuti net-hunters in social anthropology and beyond. His best-seller «The Forest People» (Turnbull 1961) and to a lesser extent «Wayward Servants» (Turnbull 1966), although widely criticised for creating a romanticised image of the Mbuti, remain classics. Since his fieldwork carried out during the last years of the colonial Belgian Congo in the Epulu area in the 1950s a series of major changes have occurred. Shortly after Congo's independence in 1960, the Simba rebellion brought violence and turmoil to the Ituri. In the 1970s President Mobutu's nationalisation campaign led to an economic collapse, followed by a general decay of the local infrastructure and a gold rush. Conservationists initiated the gazetting of the Okapi wildlife reserve in 1992, allowing the population within the reserve to stay put but limiting agriculture and hunting and prohibiting small-scale gold mining. Migration from the densely populated Kivu highlands has increased and since 1996 eastern Congo has again experienced waves of rebellions and violence.

In 2006 the first free presidential elections were held in the Congo. Many Mbuti in the Epulu area went to register themselves in one of the temporary bureaux of the electoral commission set up in Epulu. The voter card which Zaili, an elderly Mbuti, proudly displays (photo 1) is a symbol of belonging to a state and of being a Congolese citizen even though in the course of daily reality the state does not actually deliver any services. Congo's capital, Kinshasa, is more than 1,500 kilo-

metres away and contact with the state in recent years has mostly been in the form of ill-disciplined and looting soldiers. There was considerable tension the day that a group of Congolese soldiers and wildlife reserve rangers arrived in one of Zaili's forest hunting camps. The wildlife reserve's authorities had hired the soldiers to conduct a raid on small-scale gold miners – some of them deserted soldiers. The armed men stayed overnight in Zaili's camp. When they asked to be photographed and then posed with their guns Zaili joined them, uneasily posing with his notebook and pen (photo 2)³.

For many Mbuti in the Epulu area the hunting net, made of kusa liana, is their economic base (photo 3)⁴. In drive hunts, men form a semi-circle of several hundred metres with their nets attached in a single line, while women – shouting as they move towards the nets – drive small forest antelopes into the nets. To preserve meat in the high humidity it is smoked on racks placed over fires (photo 4). «The hunting net feeds the family», Faizi, an Mbuti hunter, explained, referring to the fact that bush-meat is sought after and can be exchanged for practically anything.

The bush-meat economy has transformed Mbuti forest camps into marketplaces: meat traders known as *fournisseurs* bring food (manioc, bananas, rice), alcohol, clothes and other products from villages near the road which crosses the Ituri forest to the Mbuti hunting camps in order to exchange these goods for bush-meat (photo 5). The Mbuti help the *fournisseurs* to carry their goods from their villages to the Mbuti hunting camps in the forest (photo 6). Some *fournisseurs* are Bila villagers (an ethnic group believed to have migrated into the Ituri forest several centuries ago and with whom the Mbuti have close economic and social ties) but most meat traders are more recent immigrants from outside the forest. Small forest antelopes (duikers) are used just like currency, yielding a specific amount of trading goods. *Fournisseurs* leave the forest camps when they have sold all their goods and when they have accumulated enough smoked meat – usually around ten antelopes or more – which they sell locally and in towns outside the forest⁵.

¹ I will not elaborate here on the terminology of Mbuti net-hunters, Pygmies, foragers or hunter-gatherers. For further information, see Biesbrouck et al. 1999.

² Categorizing is problematic, as social identities are highly mobile. For instance, some village farmers dig for gold, while some soldiers are at the same time poachers.

³ During colonial Belgian Congo, Zaili went to primary school where he learned to read and write.

⁴ Not all Ituri Pygmies use nets: The Efe in the northern Ituri forest mainly use bows and arrows.

⁵ Bush-meat is prized food: locally, one small forest antelope costs about three dollars; in the town of Mambasa it costs five dollars; and it costs up to double this amount in Kivu highland towns like Butembo. In the Epulu area local consumption of bush-meat has increased due to immigration even though – ironically – some of the best consumers are Congolese staff of conservation organisations which advocate against the growing bush-meat trade.

In recent years the migration of Nande people from the densely populated Kivu highlands into the lowland Ituri forest has increased. Most immigrants start clearing patches of forest for cultivation and some set up small shops – the Nande are known in Congo for being successful traders. For the Mbuti, Nande *boutiques* offer commodities and therefore, in one sense, dreams. When old Zaili leaves the forest to go to Epulu, he puts on his identifying clothes, sometimes also with a wig which a *fournisseur* left in the forest (photo 7).

The Bila and Mbuti have a significant history of engaging in long-term, rather informal economic and social relations but immigrants offer Mbuti formal payment (in cash, food, alcohol or clothes) for day-labour in their fields. Mbuti men cut down trees (photo 8) while women harvest rice. This day-labouring for immigrants has changed the relation between the Bila and Mbuti. The Mbuti's views about the immigrants are ambivalent: On one hand, many Mbuti see them as an economic alternative to the Bila, who have smaller fields and usually less to offer. On the other hand, some older Mbuti complain that the immigrants are destroying the Mbuti's relationships with the Bila. As one Mbuti said, «the idea of profit has already penetrated the heads of our Bila [villagers], which is a bad thing».

Photography in the Ituri forest is a challenge as all distances have to be covered on foot and photographic equipment can thus literally become a heavy burden. In addition, after months in high humidity, equipment is prone to become infested with fungus. While text is the classic example of ethnographic output, photography not only represents a different form of data but, thanks to its visual nature, can initiate – and often facilitate – communication. Photography formed an important part of my ethnographic fieldwork. Instead of only taking photographs, however, I found that showing and returning photographs could also be very helpful in the field, especially in situations where the ethnographer's true role was not easily appreciated. This was important as rumours spread in the villages that I was going to go gold prospecting or looking for a lost treasure that some Belgian relatives had hidden in the forest (I have no Belgian relatives at all, needless to say).

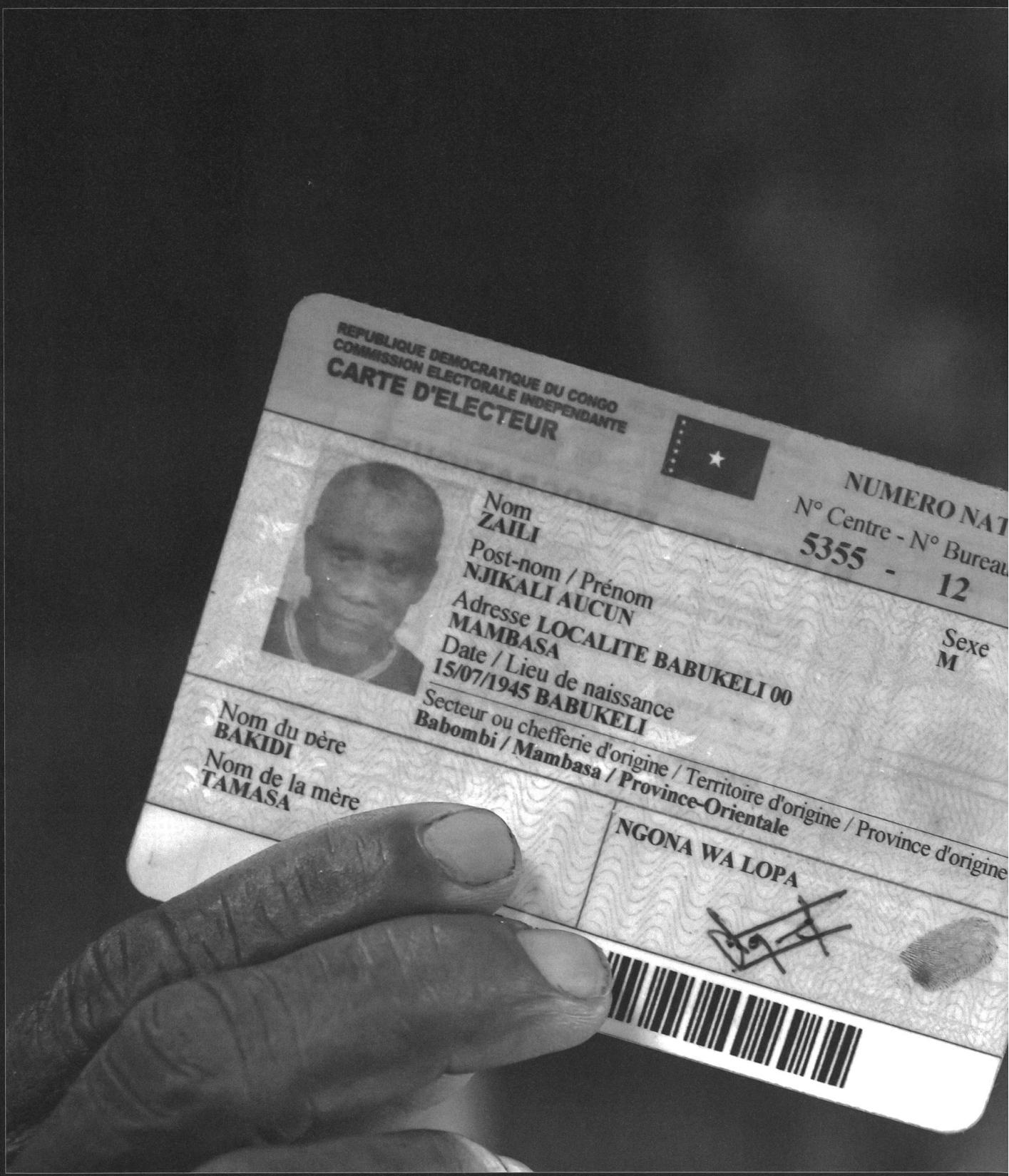
Apart from my own photographs taken during previous stays in the area, I brought Turnbull's «Wayward Servants» (1966) to the field. This book includes numerous photographs of the Epulu area taken in the 1950s which initiated lively discussions and interesting narratives about present and past. In addition Turnbull's and my own photographs also helped to better explain my role as an eth-

nographer vis-à-vis various actors. The *fournisseurs* in the Mbuti hunting camps were particularly suspicious of my presence because conservationists are opposed to their activities in Mbuti hunting camps. Since the creation of the Okapi wildlife reserve in 1992, there has been a notable long-standing conflict between the reserve authorities (supported by US conservationists) and the villagers living within the wildlife reserve. Aware that their activities were technically illegal, the *fournisseurs* were suspicious and initially saw me as a conservationist doing some sort of information-gathering in order to implicate them. Being able to define myself as an ethnographer and to distance myself from both reserve authorities and conservationists was time-consuming but crucial for my fieldwork as the *fournisseurs* are important actors in Mbuti hunting camps. Turnbull's and my own photographs eased the tension, greatly helped to explain the purpose of my stay and enabled interviews with *fournisseurs*.

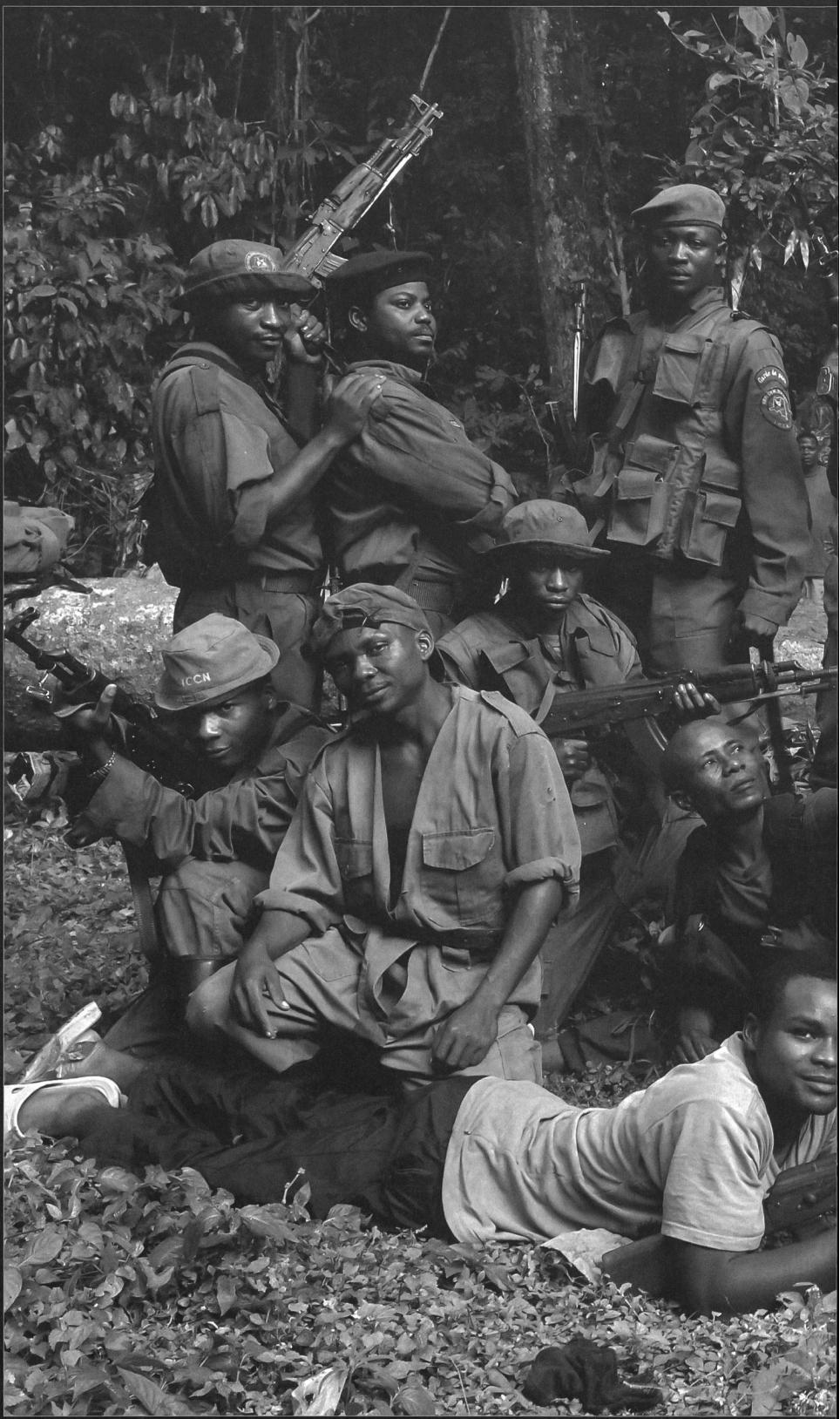
Trust was also built up by the fact of my bringing back and distributing images of people I had photographed during previous fieldwork. Mbuti, Bila and immigrants were very pleased to receive their photographs and several mentioned how glad they were to see that I had kept my promise and that they could trust me. I stayed in the field several times over a period of four years. Each return to the field represented a return with photographs, which were eagerly awaited, and each time this further improved my relations with various actors in the field, among them local chiefs who at the beginning did not respond positively to my fieldwork about «their» Mbuti in «their» forest.

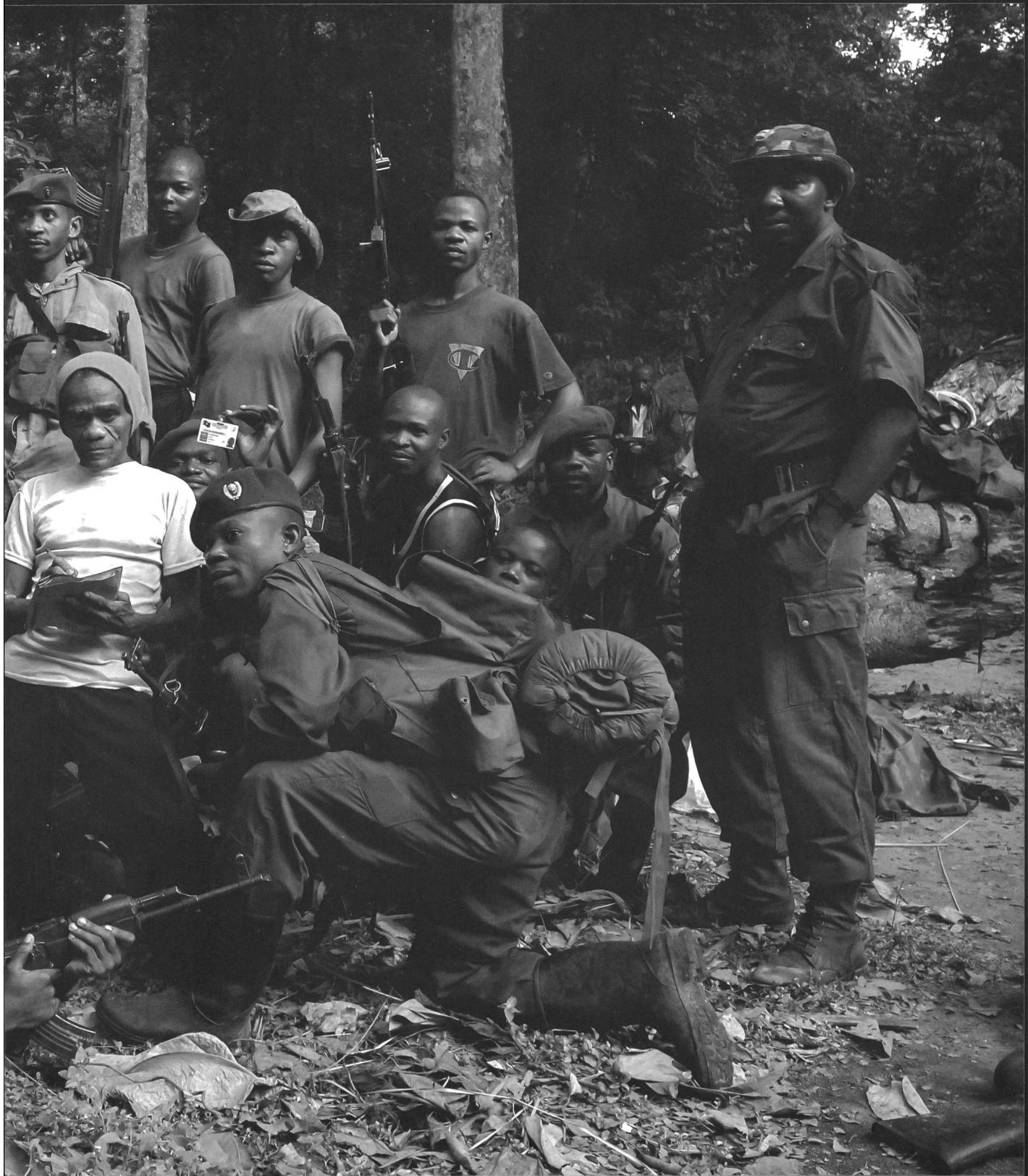
One afternoon, when the Mbuti hunters had returned early to the camp due to heavy rain, Zaili took out his small bag and showed everybody the photographs that I had brought him during my last stay. I had laminated the images so that in the humid rainforest conditions they would last longer. Zaili proudly displayed the photos in the hunting camp (surely not for the first time), recounting how and where they had been taken. His pride was also based on the fact that certainly no other Mbuti (or, for that matter, any other Congolese in the area) had such a collection of photographs. There is no doubt that the images raised Zaili's status. Photographic cameras are few and far between in this part of Congo and hiring a photographer is an expense that only a few can afford even for weddings.

The Mbuti often made jokes about my fieldwork activity, including my photography. One early morning in a forest clearing we found a female forest buffalo and three calves



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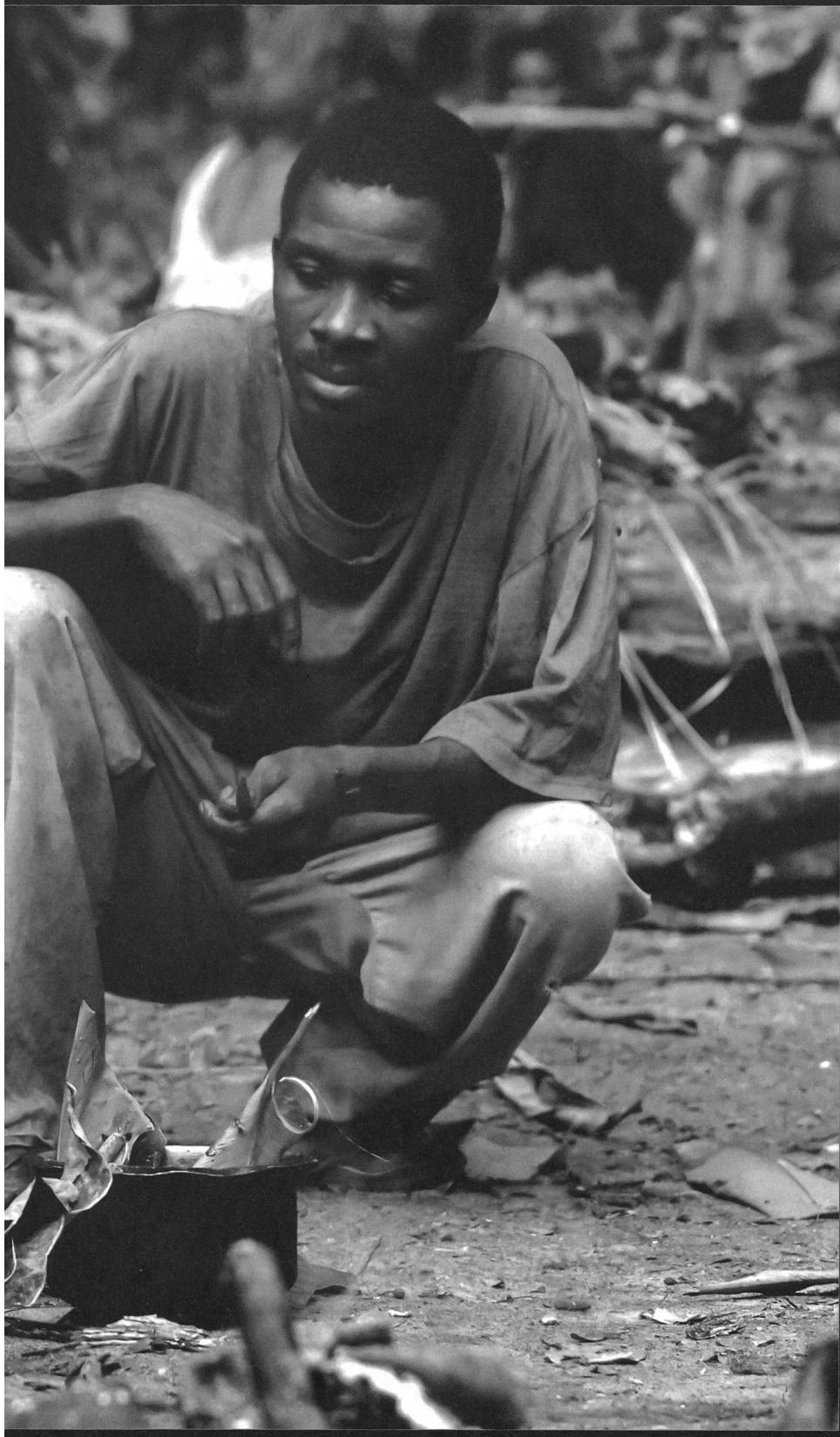
















drinking and bathing in a small river. Buffaloes have a reputation for their bad temper, even more so than elephants. The wind was favourable for our approach and I was able to take a series of good images. While I was focused on the buffaloes Bandaka, a young hunter, removed his T-shirt, took his spear and silently disappeared into the forest to approach the buffaloes from a different angle. The animals, however, sensed the danger and fled. In the evening in the hunting camp Bandaka explained in great detail how I had slowly approached the buffaloes and had «shot» them and how he had tried to get close enough to throw his spear. Everybody was eager to see the animals on the screen of the digital camera and there was general astonishment about how the images showed every detail of the buffaloes. Old Abeli commented that while he had a spear and a hunting net I had my camera for «hunting». Everybody laughed at this.

But not all photographs made everybody happy. Discussions erupted when people discovered Turnbull's photographs of the *Nkumbi* circumcision (Image 16 in Turnbull 1965). The Bila villagers did not approve of the images while the Mbuti cared less about them. The Bila said that the *Nkumbi* in the forest was considered a secret affair and that Turnbull should not have taken images in the *Nkumbi* forest camp. When, later, a *Nkumbi* circumcision was under way in the area I was allowed to attend the dances in the village but I was told I would not be allowed to go to the secret forest camp.

On a different occasion, when I was in a hunting camp with Zaili's band, news came (by means of a *fournisseur* who had arrived with new supplies) of the death of a relative of

Zaili who had died after excessive alcohol consumption. It was decided to hold a *molimo* ceremony, described by Turnbull as «to rejoice the forest» (1966: 264) after death and poor hunting. The *molimo*, a sort of long, wooden trumpet (not unlike a Swiss alphorn), source of the strange *molimo* sounds in the forest, is considered a secret not to be revealed to outsiders. Mbuti women and children also must not see it. Before I had even explained that I would not use the camera, I was told that it would be too risky to let me take *molimo* photographs over which they had no control and which could potentially reveal the *molimo* secret. The Mbuti elders' worry was not so much that other *wazungu* (white men) in faraway Europe or America would see the images of the *molimo* but rather that one day my photographs would find their way back to the Ituri forest just as the *Nkumbi* images taken by Turnbull five decades earlier had. The Mbuti appreciated the photographs I had taken during my last stay but *molimo* images were a serious issue. Away from the women, hidden in the forest near the camp, four men held a long discussion about my possible presence at the *molimo* ceremony. Finally Abeli, a well-respected Mbuti elder, called me to hear their decision. The Mbuti feared that they would die if there was ever proof that they had revealed the *molimo* secret and therefore it had been decided that I would be allowed to see the *molimo* only under the condition of «eyes only» and also with the obligation never to tell any Mbuti woman what I had seen. «You will go back and write a book using photographs», Abeli said. «Other people will see it. And maybe one day somebody will come with the book and our women will see it, and everybody will see it. That must not happen».

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