

WAMBA Y MAYUMA TALK ABOUT THEIR AFFAIRS

One night, a flood of lantern lights appeared on the horizon. Instantly, young men and teenagers in uniforms, brandishing rifles and machetes, came screaming into the village. They raped every woman they could find and abducted the children who ran terrified chased by terrible whippings. Ndenga was brutally abused and her throat was slit in front of her children and husband. Finally, a guerrilla fighter, looking around and seeing an emaciated man in his pallet, set fire to the roof with a torch and ran away.

Mivek lived with his wife Ndenga in a hamlet of mud huts surrounded by cassava fields. They had a daughter and two sons: Fahara, Wamba and Koffi. The elders helped their mother with the farming. They prepared the soil, sowed, fertilised, weeded and harvested. The youngest also helped. Their land was small, but they were able to grow several crops a year because the rains were plentiful.

Ndenga and Fahara fetched water and firewood and, from time to time, went to the market to exchange goods or to pay for them only when strictly necessary. Sometimes, both mother and daughter would be sexually propositioned and receive hurtful comments from some of the men they met along the way. They blushed and looked down to avoid misinterpretation.

Mivek worked in a state-controlled coltan mine in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The big companies that bought the coltan coming from Congo distinguished between “green” and “red” mines. The former, in theory, did not employ children or pregnant women. The latter were controlled by the various guerrilla organisations supported by some of the neighbouring countries. Mivek, like the rest of the miners, all he knew was that some were paid more than others. All of them arrived from different hamlets at the crack of dawn, including some children. They worked for six hours, rested for an hour for lunch and went back to the pit for another six hours. The work in the mine was not easy, it was very rudimentary. In the rainy season it was more complicated, as the first thing they had to do was to pump the water out of the wells. Then, they chopped the wall with a pickaxe, whoever had one, or a stone. The chopped material was put in a bucket, and when it was full it was taken outside and poured into a tube where the washing operation was carried out, so that, in addition to removing the impurities, the mineral, being heavier, fell to the

bottom. Finally, the quartz had to be separated from the coltan. Each operator was in charge of his own ore. When they managed to fill a sack of 50 kilos, the middlemen in the mine collected it and, together with others, took it to the middlemen in the city. These would collect all the coltan that fell into their hands, regardless of its origin, and sell it to a multinational company, which would then market it to the big brands in the new technologies sector.

Wamba and his fellow villagers had attended school at a nearby village for two years. He was now twelve years old and, from time to time, he was allowed to work in the mine at his father's request. He never said a word, but everyone in his family knew that he was in love with Mayuma, a pretty girl who lived in a hut next to his own. At sunset, they used to separate from the others and talk about their affairs.

Mivek earned between \$10 and \$20 a week, depending on how much pure coltan he had mined. However, it wasn't all that simple, they had to be constantly working and often had to be careful not to be seen idle by the soldiers for a second time, as if this happened to anyone, he was immediately reported and fired. In addition, uranium or radio used to be in the mud with the coltan. At the end of the day, after an hour on very bad roads and tracks, Mivek, together with other companions, arrived back in his village. After only five years, Mivek fell seriously ill with radioactivity.

The guerrillas were in possession of several mines. The working conditions were very harsh in them. The rebel soldiers beat the miners with long sticks to make them hurry up and never stop working. The men were paid a maximum of one dollar after fourteen hours of work. The women, some of them in advanced pregnancy, collected the ore to get some food. The children, many of them under the age of twelve, were forced to work inside the tunnels

Koffi was enslaved in one of these mines. His small body and little hands were very useful to reach the most hidden places. His working day lasted twelve hours and his only reward were two plates of food. One day, after some warnings, one of the tunnels collapsed and four children's bodies, one of them Koffi's, were crashed underground forever.

After his kidnapping and training period, Wamba joined the guerrilla as a soldier. Some days he had to guard and beat up mine workers, others he went out, totally drugged, to raze villages and hamlets to the ground. His training period was very degrading: long hours of physical training, weapons training, just a plate of food a day, every night they were rudely woken up and had to run out and get into formation, those who could not keep up were not fed, beatings were very frequent to make them forget normal life and remember that they were subject to blind and total obedience. For their part, both Mayuma and Fahara became sex slaves of the guerrillas. From the very beginning they suffered all kinds of physical, sexual, psychological and emotional humiliation

When Mayuma became pregnant, the guerrillas abandoned her in a hamlet. By chance, she was picked up by aid workers from organisation “Hope for life” and taken to the refugee camp in the town of Goma. There, on the verge of giving birth, she learns dressmaking and sewing. She dreams that in the future where she will be able to live in peace making clothes for the people.

Wamba managed to escape from the guerrillas with the support of an organisation that was fighting to get children and teenagers out of slavery and barbarism. He spent two months in a “transit and orientation” centre. Games and talks helped him reintegrate into civilian life. The extreme violence he experienced in the armed group caused him severe psychological distress, anxiety, habituation to drugs and alcohol, self-loathing and rejection from the community. He now receives training in vehicle mechanics at a local association, funded by a well-known NGO that operates in the town of Goma

At dusk, Mayuma and Wamba again move away from the others and go on talking about their business. No one knows anything about Fahara.

“Stories without Mufflers” (2006 -)