

0. A TEACHER in YAMBUKU GETS SICK - Story Preface

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The Yambuku Mission Hospital, hidden in this 1976 image by trees, is the place where Mabalo Lokela was treated when he became ill with a terrible disease later named "Ebola." Image online via the Centers for Disease Control Public Health Image Library.

Mabalo Lokela, a teacher living in a remote town of northern Zaire called Yambuku, is back from a trip. It is late August, in 1976, and Lokela has been visiting various places in the Mobaye-Bongo zone in the northern Equateur Region.

Now school is about to start, but Lokela isn't feeling well. He visits a local mission hospital, staffed by Belgian nuns, and reports his symptoms.

The nuns are affiliated with the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary from 's Gravenwezel in Flanders (near the city of Antwerp in northern Belgium). The Fathers of Scheut operate the Catholic mission which Belgian missionaries carved out of the forest around 1935.

The hospital has 120 beds and a medical staff of seventeen. Although they have no doctor, the staff includes a highly trained Zairian medical assistant plus three Flemish nuns who are also nurses.

Economic conditions in Zaire, at the time, are not good. "Zaire," parenthetically, is the Portuguese word for the Congo (a river which dominates the country and is known, in the Kongo language, as *nzere* or *nzadi* ("river that swallows all rivers").



Because of internal wars, following independence from Belgium in 1960, international businesses have mostly

left the country known, between 1908 and 1960, as “The Belgian Congo.” When our story takes place, the Central-African nation is known as “Zaire” (as it was between 1971 and 1997).

Schools, especially in rural areas, have few resources (hence, few students) and hospitals, generally speaking, are without medicine and surgical instruments. Except for the capital city of Kinshasa, the country seems like it is returning to the bush.

Surrounded by a dense, rain-soaked forest, the Mission of Yambuku is like an island of commitment and efficiency where people communicate with the outside world by radio once a day (or as otherwise needed). Its hospital is a place of order and peace when Mabalo Lokela first reports his malaria-like symptoms.



Lokela’s trip, to the north of Yambuku (around the Mobaye-Bongo zone in the northern Equateur Region), took place between the 10th and 22nd of August. He had traveled with six other mission employees.

Among other places, the group visited the village of Abumombazi where, in 1972, Grethe Rask—a Danish medical doctor and surgeon—had founded a local hospital. (She is better known as one of the first Western AIDS patients to die of HIV/AIDS-related complications.)

Lokela drank some *lotoko* (a kind of local moonshine), at Abumombazi, and bought freshly killed and smoked animal meat (including antelope) on his way home. Another traveler bought some freshly killed and smoked monkey meat. A few days after he returns to Yambuku, Lokela works in the fields of a nearby banana plantation.

At first, when Mabalo develops physical symptoms, he has a headache. Then he develops a fever and a fast-heart rate. Generally feeling very unwell, and believing he has malaria, he goes to the Yambuku Mission Hospital. When he sees one of the nuns, she agrees that he must have malaria.

The nurse gives Mabalo an anti-malarial shot (of nivaquine) with a needle which will be reused. New needles, for every patient injection, is a luxury this hospital does not enjoy. Many of the hospital’s patients are expectant mothers whose babies are delivered at the mission hospital.

The next person to get a shot with Mabalo’s needle will likely be one of those expectant mothers.

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Map of Congo River, by Hel-hama, online via Wikimedia Commons; license [CC BY-SA 3.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/)

Scenic area near the Yambuku Mission Hospital; 1976 photo; CDC Public Health Image Library, where curators have given the photo this description:

This photograph was taken near the Belgian mission hospital in Yambuku, Zaire, (now known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo) where the first Ebola outbreak started in August, 1976.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/A-TEACHER-in-YAMBUKU-GETS-SICK-Ebola-Past-Present-and-Future>

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Media Stream



Congo River Map

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Yambuku Hospital Area

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Yambuku and Its Rural Location

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