

Portrait of Tom TSHIBANGU



I have often thought of drawing a portrait of Tom, but have refrained to this point, because Tom is a member of the staff I supervise and because some might have said I was giving the Publications Unit more than its fair share of attention. In all honesty though, I have been held back not because of these considerations, but chiefly because I kept asking myself "What to say about Tom without it being perceived as praise, kudos or undeserved flattery?" But now I'll go ahead anyway and do it, and I must first warn you: Tom's personality is so rich, and his sense of duty so uncommonly deep that I am afraid it will take me a month to do his portrait.

How to describe him? His name sounds more like a little boy, and he resembles his name, with his look of a perennial teenager; and I don't think he will take offense at my words. Tom as "Tom Sawyer", that hero of our childhood; Tom as "Tom-Tom," that mint candy that we used to love eating as children. He is tall, thin, always in T-shirts or shirt sleeves and trendy jeans. And you won't have any trouble noticing him when you enter the Publications Office. It's simple; he is the friendliest of us all. When he arrives in the morning, it is like he is bringing the sun with him into the office. His "Good morning!" is of another dimension than the simple "Hello!" from any of us. Not only does he say "Good morning!", but he does it with a friendly, good-natured and vigorous smile that makes you forget any worries or disturbances you may have encountered in the morning. I can assure you, Tom's morning smile peps you up more than a cup of Ethiopian coffee or a ginger cocktail.

Now let's try to find out more about him: "***I joined MONUC (now MONUSCO) in early January 2002, as a journalist with the Public Information Division.***" And what are your tasks today (let's pretend I did not know)? "***For nearly six months now I have been editor-in-chief of the magazine "Echos de la MONUSCO" while at the same time I carry out various English to French, and French to English translation tasks.***"

What made want to work for the United Nations? "***To tell the truth, the UN had always attracted me, but it took me a while before I had the opportunity to actually work for the Organization. You see, I have always been inspired by two favorite sayings of my late father, who kept repeating to me "Chance is God walking around incognito" and "Get the materials ready, for the architect always ends up coming***

your way." So, in the meantime, I built rich and diverse professional experience. And that versatile experience led to many job opportunities, including my being hired by the Reuters news agency as correspondent in charge of the "Congo file", a post I occupied for three years (1998-2001). This was a stepping stone for my entry, in January 2002, into the Public Information Division of the UN Mission. The Radio Okapi project was then to be launched in February of that year, and when an official contacted me to see if I was interested in participating in this adventure, I said yes of course. And what an adventure it has been! Indeed, at that time, PID staff members could practically be counted on the fighters of one hand, and so I was tasked at the same time with monitoring local and foreign radios (that is, producing transcript in French, then the English version, or vice versa), providing the review of print media (both English and French), as well as hosting a daily radio show."

True, that was a lot of work, but Tom, I know, is not a man to be frightened by any amount of work. It's simple; he works continuously and uses his break time to read (he always has a book on hand). ..or to smoke. Oh yes, smoking is Tom's only vice – which is why I am here and now launching a nationwide appeal: he/she who will help me get him to quit smoking will be rewarded with a free portrait! Perhaps Dr. Guy Bandu could, by showing him pictures of blackened lungs or toothless mouths...

But, more seriously, Tom, tell us about your academic background. *"After my secondary education, I chose to study business and financial sciences at the Institut Supérieur de Commerce of Kinshasa (1984-1987). Then I opted for a degree in demography at the Faculty of Economics and Management of the University of Kinshasa (1989-1992). I chose this orientation because it offered then more job opportunities."*

What about your professional experiences following completion of your studies? *"Recruited by the Ministry of Planning in 1992, I was assigned to the National Institute of Statistics (INS) where I held the position of head of the "Studies, Calculations et Analyses" office for two years, during which time I was involved in several socio-economic and demographic surveys at the national level. Then, in May 1994, I was transferred to the "Scientific Population Census" project, where I took part in the analysis of the results of the 1984 census. In June 1996, I joined the Studies Department of the Central Bank of Congo, where I participated in the preparation of several analytical and planning documents, including the setting up of a household consumer price index for Kinshasa. Some of the reports I produced attracted the attention of the "financial news" branch of the Reuters news agency, and so I was offered a press correspondent post in 1998."* He may not look it, but Tom is a highly educated person, and when I say educated I mean really educated. His knowledge of the humanities (letters, philosophy, history) and of the sciences (communication, social, economic ...) is immense. And this is to say nothing about the fact that "Mister", oh sorry, "Sir" Tshibangu speaks excellent English, and not any, mind you, but "*Oxford*" English!

Tom, you have brought that long and rich experience to MONUSCO. But do you think that we, the United Nations, are responding to the expectations of the populations? I mean, are we doing well or not enough ... in the DRC? *"I remain convinced that without the UN the situation would have been much worse. Indeed, the United Nations, through its specialized agencies, is working in several areas, thus*

contributing to improving the situation with respect to health, education and so on. And also the UN, through MONUSCO, has been active on the political level in supporting the reform of State institutions, the consolidation of democracy, and the promotion of human rights, not to mention the exercise of its civilian population protection mandate in support of the security forces in the East of the country. All of these things make me say that the presence of the UN is a plus, even if I think it could do better."

Please forgive my jumping from subject to subject. How are your relations with your colleagues? *"I am satisfied with the relationships I have with my colleagues; they are an important aspect of the teamwork, and on the good atmosphere thus created, depends to a large extent the quality of our communication and, therefore, the quality of our work."* Just satisfied, you say? You must be kidding, Tom. But WE are exceedingly happy! Tom is the kind of collaborator or colleague anyone dreams about. This is someone who arrives at the office at 7:30 a.m. and does not leave until 7:00 p.m. His ability to work continuously is matched only by his desire to produce quality. He is punctual, serious, conscientious, responsible, helpful, disciplined, available and charming. I could add what his other colleagues say of him, but it would take until next year to complete. Anyway, let's get the view of the Director of the Public Information Division of MONUSCO, Charles Antoine Bambara, who echoes my comments: *"Yes, what is striking about Tom is his Sherlock Holmes-like concentration which makes him look like he is actively thinking of a solution to a riddle, especially when (as is often the case) you see him retire into a corner of the MONUSCO headquarters courtyard with a cigarette tucked in the corner of his mouth. Always available, and with a strong work ethic, Tom has always been unanimously recognized for his seriousness about his work, his commitment, his willingness to help others, as well as his Olympian calm. As head of the Public Information Division, I would like to have several Tom on our team."* Sorry, Chief, but what about several Me? *"Yes, several Aissatou too."* That's fine, you have narrowly avoided a strike here...

Let's go back to Tom, if you will, and see what his colleague or, better still, sidekick Alphonse Yulu Kabamba, with whom he shares office space and confidences, has to say of him: *"From the point of view of work, Tom is a genuine professional, a hard worker. He can remain silent all day if there is an urgent job to do. He is hardly noticeable in those moments, but after that, he goes back to his usual self - and that is, always smiling and telling jokes. We have worked together since October 2002, both in the same capacity, at MONUC / MONUSCO. There has never been any quarrel or friction between us. We have always complemented each other perfectly in our role as translator and we equally like our work; we do not fear taking on challenging tasks. On his character, I would say Tom is of a calm, jovial and good-natured temperament. His sense of friendship is very deep. He cares a lot about his friends, his colleagues and above all, he possesses the capacity for sacrifice. I can also testify that Tom always sympathizes with a colleague being in his misfortunes. I have seen him travel long distances to share a happy or unfortunate event with a colleague. He often finds the right word to comfort or encourage us. Tom retains the details of every event, including the facts, the gestures, the words, which he can exactly recount at any time; you would think he were a historian."*

I totally agree with Alphonse's depiction of Tom, except maybe when he says "historian". I think Tom is more of a comedian who has missed his calling. If you go into the Publications Unit office and you see

everyone doubled over in laughter, you know Tom has been around. He has no equal when it comes to mimicking politicians who make slips of the tongue, singers who seek to express themselves with fancy words, or humorists from all continents.

A Congolese, born in Katanga to Luba parents from Kasai, Tom keeps a very strong heritage of his Luba cultural traditions. Luba people are said to be proud, with an unquenchable desire to learn. I think we see these qualities in Tom. What sentiments do you have, Tom, when you think of the land of your ancestors? What is your view of the general situation in the DRC? ***"After 56 years of independence, the situation of the DRC, in my view, is still that of a virtual power which is ceaselessly trying to find its bearings, and which is struggling to take off despite its enormous potential. The ills of this 'giant with feet of clay' are well known: chronic political instability, weak State institutions, insecurity, external interference, lack of infrastructure, mismanagement of public affairs, a revolting contrast between rich and poor – you name it. But I still keep hope; hope for a better future, hope for peace."*** Hey yes, Tom is clear-eyed! ... Can I paraphrase Martin Luther King's words and ask: do you have a dream for your country? ***"I dream of a Congo, as imagined by our forebears, where citizens would live in freedom, peace, security and prosperity; and there would be unity, national reconciliation and political concord; and a time when democracy flourishes and justice prevails."***

Do you have other activities outside of the workplace? ***"Reading is my passion; it has been my favorite hobby since childhood. But I also practice sports, and especially yoga; it is relaxing for the body as for the mind. On weekends, I attend the "Great Guys" club, a framework for reflection on the major national and international issues."*** I told you, he is the intellectual type! Tom enjoys debating, and he is an outstanding debater. A topic discussed on TV or a public man's indiscretion or a social trend is always sure to draw lengthy, insightful comments from Tom. I may seem to be rambling a bit here but you cannot imagine what pleasure it is for me to speak of Tom's human warmth, his infectious joie de vivre. And the rich moments of communication, the laugh punctuated with karaoke that we have during work breaks, all under his impulse, make our Unit an attractive place in which to live and work.

Do you live here with your family? ***"For three years now my family has been settled in Paris for our children's education. I stay here for professional reasons..."*** Tom is married and the father of four children, and there is no shortage of chores around the house when he is with them. When spending time with his family, he says, he enjoys cooking. ***"I'm quite a good cook! My wife and children can confirm this*** (don't worry, I'll check this). ***I also like doing the laundry and I spend hours doing the ironing."*** Ngan ni! (meaning "what" in Wolof language when one expresses surprise). Would you want to spend a day at my house to help me with the ton of clothes that need ironing? I have them piled up on my bed and they have simply become my mattress. So yes I must admit I am not really buddy-buddy with ironing...

The multicultural environment... is it a chance or an obstacle? ***"For me, working in a multicultural environment is an opportunity because it helps enrich our lives as we learn to understand each other's perception of the world and, through communication with others, to enrich our means of expression."*** By the way, do you pay attention to the issue of gender balance in your actions? Can you give an example of what you're doing about it? ***"Yes, for example in my family I consider my wife as my***



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equal in all circumstances. I make sure both boys and girls are treated in the same way and are assigned the same roles and tasks in the house. I encourage each child to discover his/her real potential. At the workplace, practically all my supervisors have been women, and I have never had a problem with that, quite the contrary."

Okay now, make us smile... I know that, as any self-respecting Congolese, "sapologie" (cult of elegance) holds no secret for you, but what about "musicologie", the constant torrent of music? Are you sensitive to it? *"I'm not addicted to music. So I have little music in my home because I find that my ears are already sufficiently solicited by the music played on the streets, in buses, taxis etc. That said, my music tastes are quite eclectic: I take good music where I find it, so that I listen to Papa Wemba or Mory Kante or Yousou N'Dour with equal delight."* Ouyouyouy (another Wolof expression), the Good Lord has created a "human mutant" or "omniscient man," I don't know what I am saying anymore; I mean where is this guy from? He has good answers to all my questions! I don't know about you, but I have nothing more to say; he has said it all!