

REMEMBERING THE FIRST ROMANIAN TRANS-AFRICAN EXPEDITION (1970-1971)**COMAN Nicolae, NECULCE Dragoș, POPA Sever, CATARANCIUC Ion**

Abstract. The participation in an expedition in Africa is, I believe, the dream of any biologist. From dream to reality it is however a long way. By tenaciously pursuing the idea, hard preparation and a little luck, we succeeded. We aimed at a route for crossing the continent from west to east on a strip of land lying right and left the Equator, through wetlands and dry areas. The expedition would pass through 12 countries: Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Central Africa, Zaire (now Congo-Kinshasa), Rwanda, Uganda, Kenya. The team consisted of 8 people: Professor Nicolae Botnariuc, dean of the Biology Faculty in Bucharest – scientific leader of the expedition, Dragoș Neculce – zoologist, Nicolae Coman – botanist, Valeriu Cimpoieru – biologist, John Cataranciuc – engineer, Constantin Ludu – trial technician, Liviu Ungureanu – filmmaker, Sever Popa – doctor. Crossing the continent was to be accomplished with two cars TV (Tudor Vladimirescu) and an ARO-M61 with a prototype trailer. The objectives of the expedition were: knowledge and collecting samples of flora and fauna; testing Romanian cars; knowing the people we were about to meet, their history and culture; presentation of our country through conferences, media interviews, publications, etc.; documentary filmmaking, photo slides and other materials. After loading the materials for the expedition in Cluj, departure took place on the 10th of November with the destination Rijeka port, where we boarded the Yugoslavian ship Bohinj. After a month of sailing we disembarked in the port of Dakar, Senegal. We collected samples around the capital, Saint Louis, located at the mouth of the Senegal River in the ocean, and within Tamba-Counda reserve. Then, we went upstream the Senegal River, on unexplored roads, at an average speed of 70 km a day and reached Bamako, the capital of Mali, on New Year Eve. There we reached the Niger River, which we followed, passing through its inner delta, and then we entered the Upper Volta area. Stifling heat and a terrible drought accompanied us when crossing the 3 Volte (White, Black and Red). The dusty road led us to the capital of Niger, Niamey, city located on the bank of the Niger River. Nigeria is the first country where English was spoken, with left-hand traffic. From the north-eastern Nigeria we crossed to Cameroon going across the Chary river floodplain, and afterwards we arrived at Fort Lamy, the capital of Chad. The biologists, led by Professor Botnariuc, were very content with the activity from Lake Chad and they succeeded in collecting the living *Spirulina* alga from the northeast of the lake. Central Africa welcomed us with its equatorial forests where we met the first tribes of pygmies. To enter Zaire we had to build a raft of canoes and crossed the Oubangui River, the main tributary of the Congo River. For a month, we went through the real equatorial area of Africa visiting its most important parks (Albert, Ruwenzori, Niragongo, lakes Albert, Edward, Kivu with rich fauna and flora). We crossed quickly Rwanda, the land of 1000 Hills, cattle-breeders and tea growers, getting into Uganda, where we camped on the shore of Lake Victoria and visited the wonderful botanical garden from Entebe. Moving westwards, following mountain roads, but this time asphalted roads, we entered the twelfth country – Kenya, where we visited a number of parks located in the Rift area, but also Nairobi and Tsavo parks. After exactly 100 days after leaving the Atlantic Ocean we arrived at the Indian Ocean. Luckily, we met Bucharest motor ship in the port of Mombasa and we embarked going home together with the collected materials, friendships and unforgettable impressions of the admirable continent - Africa. After a stopover in Kuwait, the ship went to India where iron ore was loaded and, two months later, it arrived in the port of Constanța, where we unloaded the cars that had taken us across the great continent.

Keywords: First Romanian-Trans-Africa expedition.

Rezumat. Rememorări din prima expediție românească transafricană (1970-1971). Participarea la o expediție în Africa este cred, visul oricărui biolog. De la vis la realitate este însă cale lungă. Prin urmărirea cu tenacitate a ideii, prin tenacitate, pregătire și cu puțin noroc, noi am reușit. Ne-am propus un traseu de traversare a continentului de la vest la est pe o fâșie de teren situată la dreapta și la stânga Ecuatorului, prin zone umede și uscate. Expediția urma să treacă prin 12 țări: Senegal, Mali, Volta Superioară (azi Burkina Faso), Niger, Nigeria, Camerun, Ciad, Africa Centrală, Zair (azi Congo-Kinshasa), Ruanda, Uganda, Kenya. Colectivul expediției era alcătuit din 8 persoane: profesorul Nicolae Botnariuc, decanul facultății de Biologie din București – conducătorul științific al expediției, Dragoș Neculce – zoolog, Nicolae Coman - botanist, Valeriu Cimpoieru – biolog, Ioan Cataranciuc – inginer, Constantin Ludu – tehnician de încercări, Liviu Ungureanu – cineast, Sever Popa – medic. Traversarea continentului urma să se realizeze cu două mașini TV (Tudor Vladimirescu) și un ARO-M61 cu o remorcă prototip. Obiectivele expediției au fost: cunoașterea și colectarea eșantioanelor de floră și faună; testarea mașinilor de producție românească; cunoașterea popoarelor pe care urma să le întâlnim, a istoriei și culturii lor; prezentarea țării noastre prin conferințe, interviuri în mass media, publicații, etc.; realizarea de filme documentare, diapozitive și alte materiale foto. După ce au fost încărcate la Cluj materialele expediției, plecarea a avut loc la 10 noiembrie cu destinația Rijeka unde ne-am imbarcat pe vasul Yugoslav Bohinj. După o lună de navigație debarcăm în portul senegalez Dakar. Recoltăm materiale în jurul capitalei, la Saint Louis situat la vărsarea fluviului Senegal în ocean, precum și în rezervația Tamba-Counda. Urcăm apoi de-a lungul fluviului Senegal, pe drumuri neumbrate, cu o viteză medie de 70 km pe zi și ajungem în ajun de an nou la Bamako, capitala Republicii Mali. Aici întâlnim fluviul Niger pe cale-l urmărim, trecând și prin delta sa interioară și pătrundem în Volta Superioară. Căldura înăbușitoare și o secetă cumplită ne însoțește și la traversarea celor 3 Volte (Albă, Neagră și Roșie). Drumul plin de praf ne conduce la capitala Republicii Niger, Niamey, oraș așezat și el pe fluviul Niger. Nigeria este prima țară de limbă engleză, cu circulația pe stânga. Din nord-estul Nigeriei trecem în Camerun traversând zona inundabilă a fluviului Chary, după traversarea căruia ajungem în Fort Lamy, capitala Ciadului. Biologii, în frunte cu profesorul Botnariuc sunt foarte bucuroși de activitatea pe lacul Ciad, din nord estul căruia au recoltat și alga *Spirulina* vie. Africa Centrală ne întâmpină cu pădurile sale ecuatoriale unde am întâlnit primele triburi de pigmei. Pentru a intra în Zair am fost nevoiți să construim o plută de pirogi cu care am traversat fluviul Oubangui, principalul afluent al Congoului. Timp de o lună de zile am circulat în adevărata zonă ecuatorială a Africii vizitând marile parcuri (Albert, Ruwenzori, Niragongo, lacurile Albert, Eduard, Kivu cu o bogată faună și floră). Țara celor 1000 de coline – Ruanda, a crescătorilor de vite și a cultivatorilor de ceai am traversat-o repede, intrând în Uganda unde ne-am așezat tabăra pe malul lacului Victoria, vizitând minunata grădină botanică de la Entebe. Înaintând spre vest pe drumuri de munte, dar de data aceasta asfaltate, intrăm în cea de a douăsprezecea țară – Kenya unde am vizitat o serie de parcuri din Rift precum și parcurile Nairobi și Tsavo. După exact 100 de zile de la părăsirea Oceanului Atlantic am ajuns la Oceanul Indian. Spre norocul nostru, în portul Mombasa am întâlnit motonava București pe care ne-am imbarcat ducând spre

țară materialele adunate și prietenii și impresii de neuitat din admirabilul continent - Africa. După o escală în Kuweit, motonava a plecat în India unde a încărcat minereu de fier și înconjurând continentul african, după două luni a ancorat în portul Constanța unde am descărcat mașinile care ne-au purtat de-a latul marelui continent.

Cuvinte cheie: Prima expediție Românească Trans-Africană.

It has passed nearly half a century since this expedition, yet unique in Romania. The work for processing the biological materials sampled during the expedition continues even in the present. Memories, faded in a way, are however still alive. In the few pages of this article, I will try to highlight the importance of this achievement. I start by rendering a small fragment from the beginning of the volume that I published in 1975 in Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, entitled "From the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean", dedicated to the eight members of the expedition.

'A typical working day in a laboratory can sometimes turn suddenly into an exceptional one that would leave a deep mark imprinted in your consciousness, would dominate your thoughts, modify your plans and program, in other words, would get you out of the rhythm you used to consider natural, normal, throwing yourself into adventure'. Here, I remember that day. One day in March 1968, which is far away but, time did not alter my memories, did not erase the emotion I felt at that moment together with the accompanying surprise, amazement, disbelief, temptation, fascination of the idea that made me dream with open eyes.

- An expedition? Whose? Where? Who organizes it?

Dragoș Neculce, I worked with in the laboratory, had received, from ROMTRANS, the permission to transport a truck for the expedition in Alexandria, Egypt. There followed two years of dreams, thoughts, assiduous preparations of a Trans-African expedition of about 13,000 km from west to east. Slowly, the team gathered – 4 biologists (professor Nicolae Botnariuc, Dean of the Faculty of Biology of the University of Bucharest, Dragoș Neculce, a zoologist, Valeriu Cimpoieru, a biologist that worked for TVR Bucharest (The Romanian National Television) and the undersigned as a botanist); from ARO Câmpulung Factory (the engineer Ioan Cataranciuc, chief of the prototype division and Constantin Ludu, a test technician); as a filmmaker, the engineer Liviu Ungurenu, Head of the Film Laboratory of the University from Cluj-Napoca and doctor Sever Popa from the Institute of Medicine and Pharmacy from Cluj. Each of us prepared in his field by gathering materials, necessary tools and equipments or just by reading about the route, tropical diseases, history, culture and biogeography of the countries which we would pass through. Dragoș and I mainly dealt with visas, approvals, food, weapons, boats, clothing, suitable footwear, etc., etc. The acquired knowledge and the political events of the time made us decide certain changes of the previously established route and of the program of the expedition. The fights around the Suez Canal forced us to reverse the route and start from Dakar in Senegal and finish in Mombasa, Kenya. The African roads with many unstable bridges or small ferries that were manually manoeuvred by wooden rods did not ensure a good forward, so we gave up the truck opting for two TV (Tudor Vladimirescu) cars and an ARO-M 461 with trailer. Two years after we started the preparation for the expedition, we were ready for the African adventure. Instead of Constanța port we chose Rijeka port from Yugoslavia, where we boarded the ship 'Bohinj'; after a month of sailing (with stops in Syracuse - Greece, Livorno - Italy and Marseille - France) we reached Cape Verde and together with our cars we disembarked in Dakar, capital of Senegal. We were about to cross 12 countries (Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso), Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon, Chad, Central Africa, Zaire (now Congo Kinshasa), Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya, respectively the port of Mombasa at the Indian Ocean, where we were to return home.

The route planned along a strip of land north and south of the equator would pass through the main types of relief and vegetation, as one objective of the expedition was to test the Romanian cars in dry and wet climates. Among other objectives of the expedition we mention taking samples of the flora and fauna (mainly small fauna), which was to be investigated in the country; making photo materials (slides, photos, black-and-white as well as colour documentary films); we also wanted to popularize Romania with its beauties and the culture of the Romanian people; we wanted to know as much as possible the achievements and culture of the numerous peoples we were about to visit.

We said therefore goodbye to the friendly crew of the ship Bohinj and remained at a berth in Dakar port. We were afraid that we would have problems obtaining a visa, but the surprise came from elsewhere. We were not allowed to leave the port without the guarantee of an institution or of a person with a good financial situation that we would not sell our cars in Senegal. At our insistence and with the officials' willingness we managed to obtain a visa, new triptychs for the cars and the guarantee signed by the Soviet ambassador that we would not sell our cars. We did so succeed to get out of the port and we made the first camping on the African soil near the great north lighthouse. There was a great surprise when, at dawn, we were awoken by gunshots and bursts of machine-guns. We had camped in a gulch at the shore of the ocean on a military training field of the French troops.

We started to take the first biological samples, activity continued in Saint Louis, the former capital of Senegal, located at the mouth of the Senegal River. On the strip of sand between the river and the ocean, thousands of kilograms of salted fish got dry in the sun. On the left of the road, there was the fishermen's immense cemetery with some new graves covered by old fishing nets to keep the vultures from desecrating the rest of the dead. An image that can never be forgotten.

Upon our return to Dakar, we visited the university and, in particular, the faculty of sciences, where there were made research studies to obtain gold from ore using microbial oxidation and tested different methods to cure leprosy.

We left Dakar and, after we stopped at a company that obtained salt by evaporating ocean water, we visited the first national park - Tamba - counda, which disappointed us in terms of the variety and density of animals. We understood that it was a newly established park with some animals, such as lions, brought from certain zoological parks from France.

Following an earth road parallel to the railway track passing from Senegal to Mali, we got to Kidira, a village situated on a main tributary of the Senegal River – the Faleme River, which we intended to cross to enter Mali. Here, a new surprise – the absence of a ferry, and the river was quite deep; so, we could not drive through the river. The only possibility was to cross the river on the railway bridge. We found two bogies in the station and we intended to assemble a platform on which to carry the cars across the river and get them in Mali. The head of the railway station did not allow us to do this because the telegraph was broken and he could not know when the train would come from Mali. One day later, a train came from Dakar and it had a free platform which we used to carry the two TV cars and 5 members of the expedition. The other car, ARO and the trailer were supposed to go with the next train, if it had a free platform. After two days, the ARO and the other members of the team (Cataranciuc, Neculce and Coman) entered Mali, a country which supposedly we had visa for. (When we left the country we had two visas for Mali and Central Africa, but they expired until we got there).

The train passed through the savannah and, using wood as a fuel, at a sign of the stoker, people got off the train to gather wood and brought it to the engine. We arrived at Kayes. The thermometer indicated 36°C in the shade. A chief accompanied by two workers came at the platform. 'They will help you with the cars – says the chief - but today it is going to cost you more because it is Christmas.' 'Well, but you are Muslims' - I say. 'Yes, yes, but you are Christians.' And they left. In the evening, the chief came with another two workers. 'They are going to unload you. Pay them too. '

From Kayes we went upstream the Senegal River on a road, which, according to a native, had not been used by cars in the last 11 years. The local people used the train to reach Bamako – the capital of the country.

It was an extremely difficult road. When crossing certain dry valleys (wadi) we all pushed our cars. We drove 71 km in 7 hours. It took us several days to reach the capital of Mali, located on the banks of another river, the Niger. We camped at the outskirts of the city, in a mango grove, where we greeted the New Year. We were annoyed that we could not get a visa for Nigeria, and, for crossing over the Sahara desert to Lake Chad, we had neither land navigation instruments nor suitable cars capable to cross over the dunes as they were heavily loaded. It seemed we would have to go back to the Atlantic Ocean. Fortune smiled on us. A diplomatic car with the flag of Yugoslavia passed near us. Instinctively, we greeted happily. The car stopped and a man asked us: 'I saw the flag on your car. Where are you from, Chad or Romania?'

'We are Romanians' we answered. In a few minutes, the entire street was blocked by curious people and, thus, we were invited inside the precincts of the embassy of Yugoslavia. While eating (it was the first of January), we found out that our host was Zdravko Pečar, the ambassador of Yugoslavia in Mali. When he found out about our problem, he told: 'The ambassador of Nigeria is my friend as we hunt together. I shall help you obtain the visa as you are neighbours and friends, but, if you had been Stalinists as you used to be, I would not have helped you.' Indeed, the next day, the ambassador of Nigeria gave us the passports with an eight-day visa, the necessary time to cross the country which was still experiencing the Biafra war.

After completing the visits to the ministries and other officials, we left Bamako, going along the Niger River towards its delta, a true granary of the country, where we stop for a while in Segou and Mopti ancient cities. After coming out of the inner delta, the red-dusted lateritic road took us through the dry savannah up to the border crossing point Fo with the Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso). After completing the customs formalities (visas, entry tax payments, customs control), here we were in the third country of our expedition. We drove for about 100 km to Bobo-Dioulassou, where we hoped to find a market with tropical fruits. To our disappointment, we found only two bunches of green onion.

We crossed the three Volta (Black, White, Red), going towards the capital, Ouagadougou. We camped before reaching the capital in the dry landscape. Besides us, there camped another caravan, a camel caravan, led by Tuaregs. They came from Abidjan (Ivory Coast) carrying, in the Sahara Desert, cola nuts, a bitter and astringent fruit that reduces both hunger and thirst, qualities much prized by the inhabitants of the desert. In the market of the capital, we changed some of the food brought from home (beans, dehydrated vegetables, biscuits, salt) unloading a little our poor cars. Instead, we got bananas, oranges, mango, papaya.

The official language was French in Senegal and Mali, although in Burkina Faso, there lived less than 2,500 French people. We were welcomed by the officials, ministry of education, even television, where the professor gave an interview on our expedition objectives. He was asked some interesting questions, such as: What do you think about modern science?; What is the role of biology in the development of society?; How do you see the compatibility between science and religion? And more.

As there was no news from home at the post office waiting for us, we went north-eastwards, back on the red lateritic dusty roads. The savannah was dry with rare and stunted baobabs. At Kanchari, a border crossing point of Upper Volta, formalities were quick and we entered Niger, but only after 36 kilometres, there appeared the border guards of the fourth country of our route. Heat and drought were high. Vegetation was represented by thorny bushes, 2-3 meters high. Finally, red dust. In the evening, we met again the Niger River, on the banks of which it is situated the capital - Niamey. Niger was the driest country on our route. Its northern border was established on the Tropic of Cancer, in the heart of the Sahara desert.

We camped right on the river bank among the doum palms, the ones with dichotomous branching. We were pretty tired and irritated. We arrived at the post office after closing time, the campsite was full of sand and manure from the

thousands of animals brought there for watering, and mosquitoes by the thousands. We went to bed dreaming about taking a bath the next day. The next day we changed the campsite, then made all the necessary formalities at various institutions in the capital. We found out that the market was poor and the inhabitants got hostile when seeing cameras. However, there was a rich vegetation within the floodplain of the river and a wide variety of fresh fish sold by local fishermen.

From Niamey we went eastwards, but not before sending the correspondence and the package for the television to the country. The harsh lateritic roads and the overloading of our cars made the wheel rims crack. We soldered them, but for safety, Nelu Caratanciuc wrote a letter to request two rims to his colleague, Moloiu, the representative of the Romanian car company in Nigeria. It was to meet with the representatives of the company in front of the police station in the town of Kano.

A month after our departure from Dakar we had crossed 4 countries and were at the border of the fifth – Nigeria, where we camped in the dry savannah in order to cross the border in the next morning. During the night, we were lucky to participate in a local holiday dedicated to the end of the harvest season in a Hausa settlement. In the morning, we reached the border crossing point from Dan-Issa. It was a market day. The Nigerians brought for sell a great amount of millet. In the yard of the customs building, five women, four of them carrying babies tied at their back, crushed the millet in large wooden troughs, while the policemen, their husbands, were sitting on a tree trunk and listening to music to a transistor.

6 km after entering Nigeria, it appeared a panel where it was written 'Nigeria Republic' and 'keep left'. Thus, we drove on the left, but not without emotions. Three long and thorough controls waste several hours of our time. (The guns were in a special compartment. It was not the case to make them visible). By noon, we reached Kano and asked for the police station.

- Which police? The state or federal police? We were asked by the policeman. We chose, at random, the federal police and stopped in front of the building. There came the representatives of the company sent by Moloiu. We were all arrested and forced to enter the yard of the police station together with our cars. In the end, the superintendent of the federal police clarified the problem and freed us after apologizing. We required permission for camping in the yard of the police station as there was running water. We were in the northeast of the country. The roads were narrow but asphalted. We passed by plantations of mango, papaya, unirrigated millet and barley crops. During our stop at Potiskum to get fuel for our cars, three persons suffering of lepers got close begging. One of them was on foot, while the other two were riding on donkeys. They had awful injuries; they had lost their fingers and toes. On our road we saw many leper colonies, but it seemed that there were many sick people living outside.

We went to a border crossing point towards Cameroon located in a swampy area, where the road was proper only during the dry season. At the edge of the settlement of Gamburu, the border crossing point was just a hut with three walls covered with straw. We crossed the river on a narrow bridge and we were in Cameroon. We were nervous because we did not have a visa for this country, but it was not a problem. The strip of land from the northern extremity of Cameroon is 85 km wide, full of pools where local people fish nice specimens. Sorghum, millet and rice are cultivated among pools. At that time, as it was the dry season and the region was full of cattle raised by the Fulani people that we saw passing on horseback, armed with spears, bows and swords.

We arrived at Fort-Fureau, which was situated on the left bank of the Chari River. Across the bridge, it was Fort Lamy (presently N'Djamena), the capital of Chad Republic. Near the customs, a red Renault stopped near us and a thin young person with a short beard got out of the car. 'Do you speak French?' And he presented himself as Dejeux. He was the French entomologist that we were supposed to look for at ORSTOM research institute, an old collaborator of professor Botnariuc. He invited us to follow him and we arrived at ORSTOM, where he lived together with his wife. After we served refreshments and beer, they proposed to set our camp at their holiday house, located right on the bank of the river. We gladly accepted their proposal. The next day, all the biologists got the ARO car and visited the laboratories of the research institute. We talked about the alga *Spirulina* and expressed our wish to obtain it alive and put it on culture media we had already brought from Romania. They cannot clarify the issue. The algologist had only the dry alga as it was preserved by the local people for consumption. The other members of the team went to the post office and to the local authorities, where Cimpoiu and Ungureanu obtained the authorization to record the parade of the delegates of the 15 member states of AMU (The Afro-Malagasy Union) near the tribune.

At the holiday house of Dejeux family, the biologists together with Cataranciuc and Ungureanu prepared for a trip of about 50 km to Lake Chad. We went by ARO and we also had the trailer with a small boat. The lake, during the dry season had a surface of only 10,000 km², but, by the end of the rainy season, it may reach a surface of 18,000 km². The Chari River flowed into the lake through a 5-6 km-wide mouth. It is the same situation with the Logone River.

On our way to Lake Chad we met numerous delegations of the tribes from the north of the country coming for AMU festivities. They rode fully armed wearing their parade costumes. All of them gladly greeted us and we did the same. At a certain moment, our car crossed over a black band. It was a very voracious species of ants. The Africans use their claw as stiches. In the proximity of the lake, we met numerous birds near the pools from the floodplain. Among these bird species, we remarked the beautiful crested cranes and flocks of Guinea fowl. (Luckily for us, Nelu brought his hunting weapon).

We camped right on the shore. The professor was impatient. He ran to wash his hands in the clear and warm water of the lake. 'All my life I have wanted to get to Lake Chad' - he declared full of strong emotions.

We started sampling the biological material. The fishermen let us choose the specimens we wanted. Among the variety of species, we remarked genuine living fossils, like the Dipnoi fish. We asked about *Spirulina*. Mustafa, a

former driver, offered himself to guide us; thus, Nelu, Dragoș and I left by ARO without the trailer to look for the alga. Mustafa knew that the alga could be found in the salty pools located in the northeast of Chad Lake but he did not know the way there. It was normal as the sand dunes looked the same. We hired a guide who led us to Kanumbu tribe, near the northern border of Chad. The chief of the tribe agreed to lead us but on our way we hired the fourth guide who finally helped us reach the pools and we gathered *Spirulina* alive in some small jars. It was quite crowded in the car as, besides the seven of us, Mustafa bought two sheep. We succeeded to go back to Sangaria the next day, where the Professor and Liviu were waiting for us. Two days later, we returned to the capital, where the AMU festivities had not finished yet. The algologist from ORSTOM received the alive *Spirulina*.

We said goodbye to our new acquaintances and left southwards along the Logone River towards the Central African Republic. The first 150 km of the road were asphalted and thus it was easy. We left behind the vegetation characteristic to the dry savannah and, as we went further, it was replaced by tall grasses. Along the rivers there appeared gallery forests which got wider forming real equatorial forests.

Before entering Banqui, the capital of Central Africa, we cooled in the clear waters of a river. There was the only Romanian embassy on our route. (The pottery and the Romanian handmade objects were for this embassy). The people there received us gladly but also a little scared. Without a prior experience, they had reached the heart of Africa. They asked us a lot of questions about health state, food, etc.

The president of Zaire, Mobutu Sésé Séko Kuku N'gbendu Wa Za Banga wanted to meet the members of the Romanian expedition. As the way to Kinshasa by plane cost more than our entire expedition, we decided Dragoș should go alone, while the others remained there to study certain areas along the Oubanqui River, where the capital was located. This river, which is as wide as the Danube, is the main tributary of the Congo River. The staff of the embassy recommended us to visit Boali falls, which were indeed impressive. On the Lobaye River we had the opportunity to meet Pygmy tribes for the first time.

After Dragoș's return from Kinshasa, we left along the Oubanqui River aiming to enter Zaire Republic. We went pretty slowly as the road was extremely difficult. It was easy to see that we were near the equator. The streams cut deep valleys all over the place and most of the bridges were made up of 4-5 tree trunks which were not very solid. In a place like this, we found a notification written on a piece of paper. 'Damaged bridge', but we saw the notification after we had crossed the so-called bridge. Another two cars, an English and a French one, joined us, so we were a real caravan.

At Bangassou, we had an unpleasant surprise. The ferry was broken. We tried to repair it but it was not possible. The ferry was on the Congolese border. There were about 2,000 km to the first bridge. We decided to cross the five cars on a raft made of canoes. The fishermen helped us (but of course, after paying them). We put together 6 canoes tied in 3 pairs and above them tick wood boards. It took us two days to enter Zaire.

After 74 km through the equatorial forest, we arrived at Monga, where it was the border crossing point. Jeremez, the chief of the customs, saw the word Walter on our passports. 'What is this?' He asked. 'It is the brand of the gun', said the professor. When he saw the guns he stopped us.

The cars that left before (the ARO was the last car) came back as they were not allowed to cross by ferry without Jeremez's signature. We were arrested. Jeremez, who got into our car together with his motorbike, led us. We drove for 3 days to Bondo, where we were forced to camp on a football field. During the night, we got wet as it heavily rained. The next day, Jeremez brought our passports and took his motorbike. The chief scolded him for leaving the post at the border. The security staff from Bondo gave us a sealed envelope to hand over the security in Kisangani. (The National Directorate of Documentation was called Security). Three days later, the staff in Kisangani allowed us to leave. We followed the great Congo River and then left it to reach Epullu Station, where we met animals specific to the equatorial forest. We remarked the okapia, a giraffid artiodactyl mammal. The American anthropologist that led the research station presented us the results of his work with the pygmy population from the region.

We crossed through real virgin equatorial forests within the basin of the Congo River. We were really impressed. The luxuriant vegetation, in 4-5 layers, filtered the sun light so that, at the soil level, there was a greenish semi-obscure. Due to the increased humidity, I experienced problems with plant drying that I had to put them into alcohol before pressing.

The road slowly climbed on the mountain up to Bogoro, where the English explorer Stanley stayed for almost a year. We reached the great Rift, a crack in the Earth crust, almost 1,000 m deep. From the steep slope we saw the great Lake Albert located within the national park with the same name, a park that covered a distance equal to that from Cluj to Ploiești. On the shore of the lake, at Kiseny, we received the permission for our biologists, Botnariuc, Dragoș and Coman, to participate in night fishing on the lake. We were accompanied by an officer of the national security as the lake was a border area with Uganda, where it had been a coup not long before.

The tug, accompanied by seven fishing boats, began working. In the morning, the boats were towed and we all came back at the shore. We chose a wide variety of fish, among which I remarked a several kilos electric eel. We left Lake Albert going south towards the Ruwenzori Mountains. Because of the daily rains the road was slippery and full of boulders. The cars of our English and French companions could no longer follow the hard road where we drove with no more than 15 km per hour. We friendly said goodbye to each other and we started to climb towards the summit of Ruwenzori and its peak, Margareta, which could be seen among the clouds. At Mutwanga, at more than 2,000 m altitude, we found the representatives of the national park. Starting from that point, there was no longer a road. We could only climb on mountain trails. In order to climb and return, there were necessary about 5-6 days; unfortunately,

we had to give up as the rainy season from the east of the continent was about to start. Until then we had to reach the asphalted road from Uganda. Otherwise, we would have had to stay until the end of the rainy season, as the earth roads of Tanzania were impassable.

We went down to the 74 km-long Semliki River, which brought the water from Lake Eduard to Lake Albert, forming the Nile Albert, one of the springs of the great river. At a crossroads, a panel mentioned that Ishango was the most beautiful place on the planet. One meter-tall grasses waved among the acacia trees with their large crowns or around the 4-5 meters-tall euphorbias. In the tall grass, we saw different kinds of antelopes and zebras, phacochere wild boars, while on the silty shores, there appeared the snouts of the hippos, which after feeding all night, usually lie down in the mire or swim in the river. A multitude of birds (pelicans, storks, gulls) were flying above the water. Two Waterbuk males (as big as the Carpathian deer) were fighting disturbing the harmony. We got the first two buffalos out of the bushes so that Liviu could video shoot them. It was a pity that, from place to place, one could see the white bones of the hippos and elephants that had been shot by poachers during the fights in Congo.

We met the first herd of elephants and, on a panel it appeared the sign 'Priority to the elephants.' We stopped to take a picture that immortalized our crossing over the Equator. The next day, accompanied by the armed guard of the park, with the tripod installed on our ARO car, we drove the entire day taking pictures and video shooting the tens and hundreds of wild animals. At Copile, on the shore of Eduard Lake, fishermen tried to protect their fish from the audacious pelicans that wanted to take it directly from the boat with their enormous beaks; on the contrary, the marabou birds, with their red gular sac, waited patiently to receive something (Fig. 10). At the shore, we noticed herds of antelopes, buffalos and elephants that came for watering. We would have liked to stay a little longer, but we did not have time; thus, we hurried eastwards and, from Kibati, we climbed one of the active volcanos – Niragongo, but after we passed by the hot springs of the Rutshuru River.

Kibati welcomed us with rain, but, the next day, the sky cleared and we started climbing early in the morning. Sever and Dragoş took also the monkey babies that they had been taking care of since visiting Central Africa. We climbed from the equatorial forest up to the alpine meadow. At the edge of the crater, at more than 3,400 m, we admire the 6 smoking spots inside the crater. We could not take pictures and shoot for more than 15 minutes because of a snow storm. Niragongo, as well as the other two volcanoes from its proximity, Mikeno and Karisimbi, got covered by a snow layer. The next day, we arrived at Goma, on the shores of Kivu Lake, and, after we had welded some small holes in the gas tank of ARO, we pass at Giseni, which was a lovely Rwandese resort.

We entered the tenth country, the country of the one thousand hills. The local people were hard-working and they cultivated every plot of arable land or took care of their beautiful reddish cattle. One of the main crops was tea, together with pyrethrum they used to obtain a strong insecticide.

Following a road used by tea planters we reached the border of Uganda. The guard opened the barrier (after paying him) and we arrived in the eleventh country. The joy did not last long because, being dark, we got stuck with our first car in a muddy area with hot springs. We spent the night there because we could not get the car out of mud. The next day, helped by a bus and the people travelling by it, we succeeded to get our car out of the mud. Covered in red mud we entered directly in the yard of the police station from Kabale. It was a Sunday morning but the policemen sent after the person in charge with the visas who was attending the mess at the nearby church.

We had 10 days to cross Uganda. We were extremely happy. The rainy season had already started, but it did not matter. We were driving on an asphalted road. We did not stay much in the capital city Kampala as we had to be attentive after the recent coup especially after the first car 'the ambulance' had been stopped by the police. We were lucky they did not find the doctor's gun.

'What would have happened if they had found it?'

'They would have shot you and then sent their apologies to the Romanian Government'. We were told afterwards by the chief of the Romanian commercial representation in Kenya.

We stopped and camped at Entebe on the shores of Victoria Lake where we took samples.

We visited the nearby botanical garden, one of the most original institutions of this kind in the world. Although we were caught by a torrential rainfall during the night, as it may happen only at the Equator, in the morning we left eastwards. We crossed the Nile Victoria near Owen falls, where the fast water was used to produce electric power. In the evening, we camped within the high plateau at more than 2,800 m altitude. It was really cold. There were 9°C outside, but in tents, it was a little better. We were sitting around the cooking machine waiting for the soup to boil, when we suddenly heard radio Iaşi. It was the first and the last news from home.

In the morning, we crossed again the Equator. The temperature was 9°C. The altitude 3,090 m. We were again in the southern hemisphere. The road was getting down among forest plantations, most of them of coniferous brought from Mexico, Canada, Australia. We crossed the border to Kenya, the twelfth country. The asphalted road reached the Rift Valley, the great foredeep of the continental shield, which shelters a chain of lakes, most of them sodic.

The first lake is Nakuru, the one which is a real sanctuary of flamingos the number of which is estimated to 1.5 million specimens. Along the Rift, which we followed to the capital, Nairobi, we met numerous wild animals (antelopes, zebras, giraffes, ostriches, etc.).

We admired and took photos of the animals while driving as we were in a hurry to meet the staff of the Romanian commercial representation who received us very warmly. Nairobi has a modern centre resembling a European city. We were already used with driving on the left and the crowded traffic in the city did no longer represent

a problem. The city was founded in 1899 when the Englishmen built the railway that connected Mombasa port to Kampala. In the area of the future city, the workers discovered the springs of the Athi River and called the place Nairobi, namely good water. The media praised the qualities of our cars.

Just at the margin of the city, there was Nairobi National Park, with numerous wild animals, which we visited. The park was separated from the city through an electric fence, but there was not a fence in the south and, thus, a large part of the animals migrated to Tanzania, in search of grass after the rainy season.

We said goodbye to our fellow citizens and went to Mombasa visiting the last big park of the continent, Tsavo, situated at the foot of the great volcanic Mount Kilimanjaro.

Finally, we saw in the horizon the silhouettes of the coconut trees. We reached the Indian Ocean exactly one hundred days after we had left the Atlantic shores.

The group of the Romanian geologists from GEOMIN, who were in Mombasa to open an iron mine, gladly welcomed us. GEOMIN had its headquarters exactly on the shore and we were able to work very well in the reef, where we collected a substantial amount of oceanic species.

Luckily, there was a Romanian ship in the port, 'Bucharest' that carried sugar. Commander Rădulescu agreed to take the cars and expedition members, but the ship was not going to return directly home. It had to go first to Kuwait and then to India to take iron ore for Constanța port; the route surrounded the African continent. We agreed to embark.

After boarding formalities ended, we made our last journey on African soil in heavy rain. The cars were put on the deck. A roaring of the siren, a sign of our departure. Gathered on the deck, we watched wistfully the detachment from the shore of the continent, its people and wonderful places, but unforgettable memories and lasting friendships had already been built.

We were guests on the ship 'Bucharest' for two weeks, until we stopped in Kuwait; from there, the members of the team left for Bucharest by plane, via Athens, except for Dragoș, who accompanied the ship until its arrival in Constanța. Two months later we gathered again and, with our cars, full of the red dust of Africa, went for Cluj, the end of our journey.

The samples gathered during the expedition were processed by the University of Cluj, the University of Bucharest, the Biology Institute of the Romanian Academy and the Antipa Museum. There were made photo albums and slides for schools, documentary films, etc., etc.

46 years have already passed and the echoes of this first Romanian Trans-African expedition have not yet extinguished.

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