

Worksheet #1

The Congo River Resource Sheet

Bending and arching, looking curiously confused, the Congo River makes its way through central Africa, crossing the Equator twice. It's an enormous river, dominating both geography and human life in Zaire [now the Democratic Republic of the Congo]. In his famous novella *The Heart of Darkness*, Joseph Conrad wrote of the Congo:

There was in (the world) one river especially, a mighty big river, that you could see on a map, resembling an immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land.

Actually the Congo has several tails. A dozen major tributaries spill into its serpentine body. These tributaries are themselves fed by other rivers, each farther and farther lost in the depths of the land. One such branch, running through the grasslands of south-central Zaire, roughly a thousand miles east of the Congo's main body, is the Lubilashi River. On a map, the Lubilashi appears as an unremarkable ribbon meandering among the others. But on the ground it is wide and powerful; an impressive river. At one point along its banks live 20,000 people banded together in a chiefdom called Kalambayi. Like the river along which they live, the people of Kalambayi are lost, their lives barely touched by the probing hands of the 20th century. To this place I journeyed with my newly acquired duffel bag [as a Peace Corps Volunteer].

One way to understand what it means to be lost in sub-Saharan Africa is to visualize the continent in terms of concentric circles. The outermost circles, near the coasts, generally have the highest levels of economic development.... But as one moves inward geographically in Africa, one moves downward in income. On the way to the center of the continent, one passes through ever-tightening circles of poverty until, inside the final, smallest ring, one finds Kalambayi: a 400-square-mile patch of simple mud huts and barefoot people.... There are few places in the world where the people are as poor and the life as traditional.

For two years, I lived among the Kalambayan people. I spoke their language and taught many of them how to raise fish. My goal was to increase family protein consumption. But what I gave these people in the form of development advice, they returned tenfold in lessons on what it means to be human. There, at the center of the continent, they shared with me the ancient spirit of Africa's heart. They shared its hopes, its generosity. Above all, they shared its unbending will to survive in the face of adversities so severe I nearly lost my life more than once just passing through.

From the Introduction to Mike Tidwell's *The Ponds of Kalambayi*