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The right place, at the right time: focus hauls the best catches

The Wagenia fishermen straddle the past and present from their precarious perches above the Congo River.

Just south of the city of Kisangani, in northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo, the *pęcheurs Wagenia* work the same way they did when the explorer Henry Morton Stanley arrived in 1883. He stopped at the farthest navigable point on the Congo River, more than 2,000 kilometers up-stream from its mouth. Seven cataracts, known as Boyoma or Wagenia Falls, stretch over 100 kilometers, each waterfall offering a spot for a special kind of fishing.

Elaborate scaffolding of poles and vines hold traps at strategic points to catch fish as they go over the rapids. With few resources and a drive for survival, each village's fishermen focus on the best opportunities presented at the nearest rapids.

The hand-woven, cone-shaped traps can measure twice a man's height. The fishermen clamber over the wet scaffolding high above the churning waters to check their traps at dawn and dusk, says Clément Mangubu, professor of journalism at the University of Kisangani and himself a Wagenia fisherman.

The Wagenia fishermen catch about 20 kinds of fish, large and small, to sell at markets in Kisan-gani and surrounding villages. But the catch is dwindling as the growing population puts pressure on fish stocks.

Kisangani had 40,000 people in the early 1950s; today, its population is estimated between 600,000 and 1.2 million. The city's edges come right up to the closest of the seven Boyoma Falls. There, overhead, a high-voltage cable carries electricity to the city, whose high-rises can be seen above the trees.

"The fishermen don't like to go to the city," Prof. Mangubu says. "They want to stay in their environment and keep their traditions."

Training begins very young. “When a baby is three months old, he is thrown into the river’s edge, to ‘drink water,’” Prof. Mangubu says. As soon as they can walk, they follow their fathers to learn the crafts of scaffolding and trap-making.

The savoir-faire — how to build, which species of trees will resist the force of the waters—passes from one generation to the next. The work is never-ending, going far beyond retrieving fish twice a day. During the heat of the day, the fishermen repair nets and traps or go to the surrounding lush forest to cut trees whose trunks form the scaffolding, and vines to weave into the ropes that hold together the structures.

The work varies by season. When the river is low, the fisherman use pirogues to haul the tree trunks to build — or rebuild — scaffolds. They plant the trunks upright in the midst of the rapids, wedging them between huge rocks that can be as big as a house, Prof. Mangubu says.

The process takes many days. Some scaffolds hold for several decades, he says, but others can be destroyed in minutes by floods. “Then they have to rebuild, sometimes starting from scratch,” he says.

The work of erecting scaffolding is a specialization among the fishermen. “They train young,” Prof. Mangubu says. “They’re real engineers. You have to be a real expert to do that.”

The scaffolding goes up right along the edge of the rapids. The fishermen have to maneuver the tree trunks from the pirogues into the current, and secure them with vines, not only against the rocks that make up the falls but also against the vicious current.

The water can be treacherous. “It goes really fast,” he warns. The Wagenia Falls are the eighth biggest in the world by width, at 1,400 meters across. The drops vary along the cataracts, with

the highest around 3 meters.

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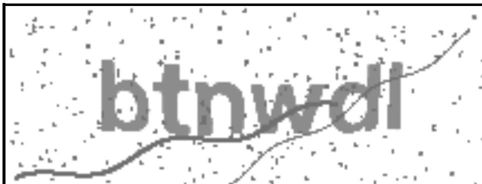

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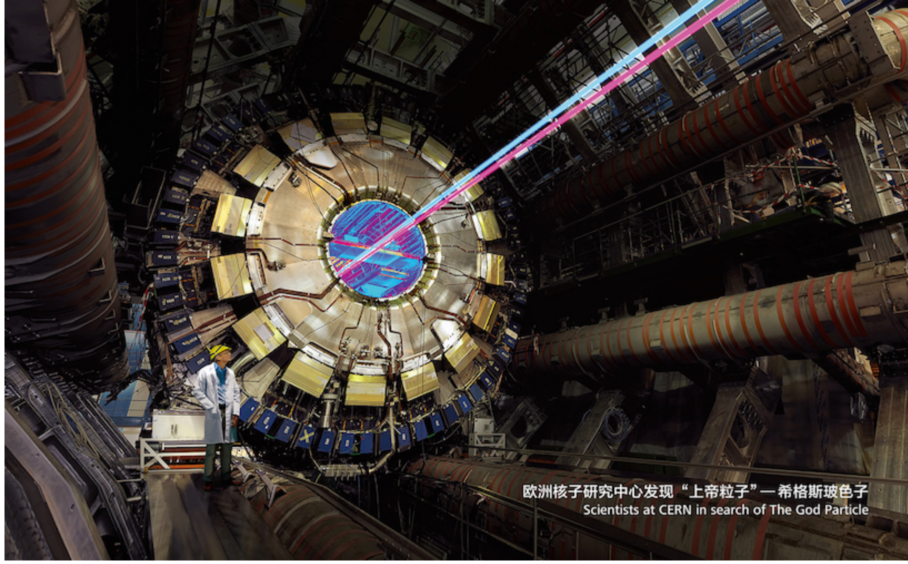

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