



Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba pictured in the garden of the Presidential Residence, Libreville

SARAH MONAGHAN

Mère Edith

Gabon's First Lady is a doctor whose healing hands and philanthropic spirit have touched the lives of the nation

DRIVE SLOWLY – animals roam free”, say signs bordering the lawns. *Gabon* magazine is enjoying a private tour of the wildlife and botanical park that the First Lady of Gabon has created at the Presidential Residence in Libreville.

Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba is at the wheel and driving with care around the landscaped estate. The Mercedes glides past a Monet-inspired lake of pink and white lotus flowers. She points out the orchid house with pride – as a passionate collector, Mrs Bongo has spent years gathering more than 4,000 species from all over the globe. A giant tortoise lollops into view and trundles across the grass. In the distance, beyond an enclosed crocodile wetland, a field of African savannah buffalo are grazing – their massive horns broadening into a heavy shield across their foreheads. In front of us, deer are nibbling the shrubbery. “My gardener would prefer to have them fenced off but I insist they run free. I believe nature finds its own balance,” she says.

In search of proof

For the First Lady, the tranquil park surrounding her home is clearly a treasured sanctuary from the public responsibilities that fall to the wife of the Chief of State. “For me it is paradise. It is my place of peace,” she tells us.

At the ostrich enclosure, she stops the car and smiles as the startled birds begin to run, their rear ends wobbling in a comical fashion. Explaining the difference in plumage colouring between the males and the females, she refers to the phrase about ostriches putting their heads in the sand. “Ostriches actually

bury their eggs to keep them safe and they sink their heads into the sand to check on them. The phrase is used to describe someone who’s hiding from reality quite incorrectly,” she says. “That kind of assumption is the perfect example of why you should never, ever, accept a conclusion until it’s proven.”

The observation and the insistence on the need for proof empirical are characteristic of this woman who has a hard-won reputation as providing the impetus for a series of unprecedented achievements in her adopted country. Born in 1964 in Brazzaville Congo, Edith-Lucie Bongo Ondimba is the eldest daughter of President Denis Sassou Nguesso. A medical doctor by profession, she began her career at the University Teaching Hospital of Brazzaville in 1989 where she worked as a paediatrician before her marriage in 1990 to the President of Gabon, Omar Bongo Ondimba. From the start, the new wife of the Chief of State insisted on continuing her career, initially taking up a post at the paediatric hospital of Owendo, Libreville. “For me, not working would be unthinkable,” she says. “Fortunately, my husband understood that...”

Her upbringing as the daughter of one of Africa’s longest-serving statesmen has, helped equip her, she freely admits, with the diplomatic skills that have smoothed her path in the pursuit of a string of ambitious projects that have improved the lives of the Gabonese. Motherhood – she has a son and daughter, Yacine Queenie, 14, and Omar-Denis, 11 – has also been a motivating factor. “Having children changes you,” she says. “It teaches you to have a healthy fear for the people you have put on this earth.” Tellingly, her work at the heart of Gabonese society has won her the affectionate sobriquet of ‘Mère Edith’. →



“The more you learn, the clearer it becomes how a love of medicine has influenced her goals, all of which have improved the lives of the Gabonese”



Indeed, it was the appeals of other mothers that motivated her to set up Gabon's only school for children with learning and visual difficulties. "As wife of the head of state, I've always received many requests for help," she says. "To start with, I dealt with them case by case, but when I saw the numbers of children with disabilities who were unschooled and uncared for in Gabon, I realised that I had to do something."

Characteristically, she used her initiative to come up with her blueprint for a dedicated school. "When I accompanied my husband on state visits, I took advantage and visited institutions abroad to see how they were run. Later, I wrote to the director of the leading school for the blind in France and I advertised for staff with specialised skills."

In 1996, Fondations Horizons Nouveaux (FHN) opened in Libreville. Now a centre of excellence praised by UNESCO and a pioneering institution in central Africa, it has a team of 35 specialised staff and provides dedicated subsidised care to 120 children with a range of mental and physical disabilities.

As President of the FHN, the First Lady clearly still retains the hands-on role she played in the school's creation. "She's here almost every day," says Serge Guillemet, director of the Centre for the Visually Impaired at FHN, who is himself blind. "She's very much loved. She's the dynamo behind this place."

It's obviously a natural calling. "I am always overcome by the gentleness of the children," says Mrs Bongo. "I have become Mère Edith to more than 100 little ones and now this is no longer just a job; it is a dedication. The children are all so beautiful and so full of life."

A medical métier

The more you learn about her, the clearer it becomes how much Mrs Bongo's background in the field of medicine has been influential in her choice of goals. She is a member of Médecins du Monde, the international humanitarian aid organisation, and she is also the founder of Gabon's most cutting-edge and best-equipped hospital, the Polyclinique El Rapha in Libreville. The 50-bed hospital, which opened in 2000, offers specialised diagnostic and imagery facilities plus an extensive range of other specialised services, including neo-natal, paediatric, gynaecological and obstetrics, surgical and emergency, to patients in Central and West Africa. It also plays an educational role, offering specialised teaching services to local health professionals.

HIV/AIDS is a disease in which she has a strong personal interest, both from a scientific

and compassionate point of view. "I specialised in retroviral diseases for my doctoral thesis and I've seen this virus both under the microscope and in action in my own country," she says. It is, she adds, with feeling, "the devil's-own". "For me, its control has become a personal challenge..."

Sub-Saharan Africa is home to more than 60 per cent of all people with HIV, but accounts for just over 10 per cent of the world's population. Last year, 2.3 million people in sub-Saharan Africa died of AIDS.

Taking the lead

These appalling statistics prompted Mrs Bongo to become the founding President of the organisation African First Ladies Against HIV/AIDS in 2002, and September 2005 saw her take a leading role in New York at the new *Treat Every Child as Your Own* campaign that calls for an end to the secrecy and stigma that surround AIDS in Africa.

Accompanied by 40 African first ladies and in the presence of American First Lady Laura Bush, she unveiled a unified effort to fight HIV/AIDS, challenging adults to take responsibility for children and urging them to break their silence on the disease. "Our objective is to awaken a sense of humanity and responsibility in people," she says.

On a local level, in Gabon, where the HIV infection rate is calculated at 7.7 per cent, Mrs Bongo has been influential, leading a series of nationwide awareness campaigns that encourage fidelity, abstinence and the use of the condom. "The national dynamic has been very positive," she says. "It has involved politicians, religious institutions and schools. It is a fight that has been taken on by both the individual and society as a whole." Her husband, the President, she adds, has been 100 per cent supportive of her efforts.

From the start, Mrs Bongo has been a champion of the women of Gabon. They are, she says, the foundation of the country and their empowerment is essential for its advancement. "It is women who are the most vulnerable to HIV because of their economic weakness," she says. "A woman can't force a man on whom she is dependent to wear a condom. We need to awaken in them a spirit of independence and improve their intellectual, cultural and economic skills and then assist them further with training, home management and micro-finance skills. If we can do that, believe me, women will be the making of this country."

With Mrs Bongo's track record, they will indeed, if she has any part to play in it. Gabonese women – and men – can't fail to be inspired and moved by their First Lady. Proof empirical... ■

Sarah Monaghan

The First Lady accompanies the President on a state visit (above). President Bongo Ondimba in relaxed mood with his wife (left)

BRIGHT BLOOMS

THE FIRST Lady is a passionate collector of orchids. Orchids thrive in Gabon's equatorial climate as it is both hot and humid and are found in all of its habitats including the coast, high ground, savannah and rainforest. There are estimated to be around 300 species although this figure may be higher as much of the interior has not yet been fully explored and catalogued. The dense depths of the rainforests of Gabon, however, which cover 80 per cent of the territory, are particularly rich in their breadth of species and offer a paradise for botanists.

The open land species that are common on the savannahs and wetlands are *Eulophia*, *Platycoryne*, *Habenaria*, *Brachycorythis pleistophylla*. In the undergrowth of the forests, *Phaius manii*, can be found.

It is the epiphyte species (sometimes known as air plants, these attach themselves to trees and other plants) that are the most numerous. The most easily found examples include: *Plectrelminthus caudatus*, *Cyrtorchis chailluana* and *Calyptrochilum emarginatum*. The latter produces stems that look like vines growing over five metres in length. Also to be found are *Angraecum eichlerianum*, *Listrostachys pertusa*, and numerous species including *Polystachya* and *Bulbophyllum*, *Diaphanante*, *Vanilla* and *Tridactyle*.

In Gabon, blossoming takes place throughout the year, although March to May and September to December, are the most interesting periods. ■

