

The Forest People

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The bestselling, classic text on one anthropologist's incredible experience living among the African Mbuti Pygmies, and what he learned from their culture, customs, and love of life.

In this bestselling book, Colin Turnbull, a British cultural anthropologist, details the incredible Mbuti pygmy people and their love of the forest, and each other. Turnbull lived among the Mbuti people for three years as an observer, not a researcher, so he offers a charming and intimate firsthand account of the people and their culture, and especially the individuals and their personalities. *The Forest People* is a timeless work of academic and humanitarian significance, sure to delight readers as they take a trip into a foreign culture and learn to appreciate the joys of life through the eyes of the Mbuti people.

Colin M. Turnbull was born in London, and now lives in Connecticut. He was educated at Westminster School and Magdalen College, Oxford, where he studied philosophy and politics. After serving in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve during World War II, he held a research grant for two years in the Department of Indian Religion and Philosophy at Banaras Hindu University, in India, and then returned to Oxford, where he studied anthropology, specializing in the African field.

He has made five extended field trips to Africa, the last of which was spent mainly in the Republic of Zaïre. From these trips he drew the material for his first book, *The Forest People*, an account of the three years he spent with the Pygmies of Zaïre.

Mr. Turnbull was a Professor of Anthropology at George Washington University in Washington, D.C. He is a Research Associate at the American Museum of Natural History in New York, and a Corresponding Member of Le Musée Royal d'Afrique Centrale. Chapter 1

The World of the Forest

In the northeast corner of the Belgian Congo, almost exactly in the middle of the map of Africa...lies the Ituri Forest, a vast expanse of dense, damp and inhospitable-looking darkness. Here is the heart of Stanley's Dark Continent, the country he loved and hated, the scene of his ill-fated expedition to relieve Emin Pasha, an expedition costing hundreds of lives and imposing almost unbearable hardships on the survivors, who trekked across the great forest not once, but three times, losing more lives each time through fighting, sickness and desertion.

Anyone who has stood in the silent emptiness of a tropical rain forest must know how Stanley and his followers felt, coming as they all did from an open country of rolling plains, of sunlight and warmth. Many people who have visited the Ituri since, and many who have lived there, feel just the same, overpowered by the heaviness of everything -- the damp air, the gigantic water-laden trees that are constantly dripping, never quite drying out between the violent storms that come with monotonous regularity, the very earth itself heavy and cloying after the slightest shower. And, above all, such people feel overpowered by the seeming silence and the age-old remoteness and loneliness of it all.

But these are the feelings of outsiders, of those who do not belong to the forest. If you are of the forest it is a very different place. What seems to other people to be eternal and

depressing gloom becomes a cool, restful, shady world with light filtering lazily through the tree tops that meet high overhead and shut out the direct sunlight -- the sunlight that dries up the non-forest world of the outsiders and makes it hot and dusty and dirty.

Even the silence is a myth. If you have ears for them, the forest is full of sounds -- exciting, mysterious, mournful, joyful. The shrill trumpeting of an elephant, the sickening cough of a leopard (or the hundred and one sounds that can be mistaken for it), always makes your heart beat a little unevenly, telling you that you are just the slightest bit scared, or even more. At night, in the honey season, you hear a weird, long-drawn-out, soulful cry high up in the trees. It seems to go on and on, and you wonder what kind of creature can cry for so long without taking breath. The people of the forest say it is the chameleon, telling them that there is honey nearby. Scientists will tell you that chameleons are unable to make any such sound. But the forest people of faraway Ceylon also know the song of the chameleon. Then in the early morning comes the pathetic cry of the pigeon, a plaintive cooing that slides from one note down to the next until it dies away in a soft, sad, little moan.

There are a multitude of sounds, but most of them are as joyful as the brightly colored birds that chase one another through the trees, singing as they go, or the chatter of the handsome black-and-white Colobus monkeys as they leap from branch to branch, watching with curiosity everything that goes on down below. And the most joyful sound of all, to me, is the sound of the voices of the forest people as they sing a lusty chorus of praise to this wonderful world of theirs -- a world that gives them everything they want. This cascade of sound echoes among the giant trees until it seems to come at you from all sides in sheer beauty and truth and goodness, full of the joy of living. But if you are an outsider from the non-forest world, I suppose this glorious song would just be another noise to grate on your nerves.

The world of the forest is a closed, possessive world, hostile to all those who do not understand it. At first sight you might think it hostile to all human beings, because in every village you find the same suspicion and fear of the forest, that blank, impenetrable wall. The villagers are friendly and hospitable to strangers, offering them the best of whatever food and drink they have, and always clearing out a house where the traveler can rest in comfort and safety. But these villages are set among plantations in great clearings cut from the heart of the forest around them. It is from the plantations that the food comes, not from the forest, and for the villagers life is a constant battle to prevent their plantations from being overgrown.

They speak of the world beyond the plantations as being a fearful place, full of malevolent spirits and not fit to be lived in except by animals and BaMbuti, which is what the village people call the Pygmies. The villagers, some Bantu and some Sudanic, keep to their plantations and seldom go into the forest unless it is absolutely necessary. For them it is a place of evil. They are outsiders.

But the BaMbuti are the real people of the forest. Whereas the other tribes are relatively recent arrivals, the Pygmies have been in the forest for many thousands of years. It is their

world, and in return for their affection and trust it supplies them with all their needs. They do not have to cut the forest down to build plantations, for they know how to hunt the game of the region and gather the wild fruits that grow in abundance there, though hidden to outsiders. They know how to distinguish the innocent-looking itaba vine from the many others it resembles so closely, and they know how to follow it until it leads them to a cache of nutritious, sweet-tasting roots. They know the tiny sounds that tell where the bees have hidden their honey; they recognize the kind of weather that brings a multitude of different kinds of mushrooms springing to the surface; and they know what kinds of wood and leaves often disguise this food. The exact moment when termites swarm, at which they must be caught to provide an important delicacy, is a mystery to any but the people of the forest. They know the secret language that is denied all outsiders and without which life in the forest is an impossibility.

The BaMbuti roam the forest at will, in small isolated bands or hunting groups. They have no fear, because for them there is no danger. For them there is little hardship, so they have no need for belief in evil spirits. For them it is a good world. The fact that they average less than four and a half feet in height is of no concern to them; their taller neighbors, who jeer at them for being so puny, are as clumsy as elephants -- another reason why they must always remain outsiders in a world where your life may depend on your ability to run swiftly and silently. And if the Pygmies are small, they are powerful and tough.

How long they have lived in the forest we do not know, though it is a considered opinion that they are among the oldest inhabitants of Africa. They may well be the original inhabitants of the great tropical rain forest which stretches nearly from coast to coast. They were certainly well established there at the very beginning of historic times.

The earliest recorded reference to them is not Homer's famous lines about the battle between the Pygmies and the cranes, as one might think, but a record of an expedition sent from Egypt in the Fourth Dynasty, some twenty-five hundred years before the Christian era, to discover the source of the Nile. In the tomb of the Pharaoh Nefrikare is preserved the report of his commander, Herkouf, who entered a great forest to the west of the Mountains of the Moon and discovered there a people of the trees, a tiny people who sing and dance to their god, a dance such as had never been seen before. Nefrikare sent a reply ordering Herkouf to bring one of these Dancers of God back with him, giving explicit instructions as to how he should be treated and cared for so that no harm would come to him. Unfortunately that is where the story ends, though later records show that the Egyptians had become relatively familiar with the Pygmies, who were evidently living, all those thousands of years back, just where they are living today, and leading much the same kind of life, characterized, as it still is, by dancing and singing to their god.

When Homer refers to the Pygmies, in describing a battle between Greek and Trojan forces in the Iliad, he may well be relying on information from Egyptian sources, but the element of myth is already creeping in.

When by their sev'ral chiefs the troops were rang'd,

With noise and clamour, as a flight of birds,
The men of Troy advanc'd; as when the cranes,
Flying the wintry storms, send forth on high
Their dissonant clamours, while o'er th'ocean stream
They steer their course, and on their pinions bear
Battle and death to the Pygmaean race.

By Aristotle's time the Western world was evidently still more inclined to treat the Pygmies as legend, because Aristotle himself has to state categorically that their existence is no fable, as some men believe, but the truth, and that they live in the land "from which flows the Nile."

Mosaics in Pompeii show that, whether the Pygmies were believed to be fable or not, the makers of the mosaics in fact knew just how they lived, even the kinds of huts they built in the forest. But from then until the turn of the present century, our knowledge of the Pygmies decreased to the point where they were thought of as mythical creatures, semi-human, flying about in tree tops, dangling by their tails, and with the power of making themselves invisible. The cartographer who drew the thirteenth-century Mappa Mundi, preserved in Hereford Cathedral, England, located the Pygmies accurately enough, but his representations show them as subhuman monsters.

Evidently there was still some question as to their reality up to the seventeenth century, because the English anatomist Edward Tyson felt obliged to publish a treatise on "The Anatomy of a Pygmy compared with that of a Monkey, an Ape, and a Man." He had obtained from Africa the necessary skeletons, on which he based his conclusion that the so-called "pygmy" was, quite definitely, not human. The "pygmy" skeleton was preserved until recently in a London museum, and it was easy to see how Tyson arrived at so firm a conclusion. The skeleton was that of a chimpanzee.

Portuguese explorers of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were responsible for many of the more extravagant accounts. It may well be that they actually did see Pygmies near the west coast of Africa, or they may have seen chimpanzees and mistaken them for Pygmies. But it is curious that they should have thought of the Pygmies as being able to make themselves invisible, and also as having the power, small as they were, to kill elephants. The Pygmies today still kill elephants single-handed, armed only with a short-handled spear. And they blend so well with the forest foliage that you can pass right by without seeing them. As for their having tails, it is easy enough to see how this story came into being, if the Pygmies seen by the Portuguese dressed as they do today, as is more than likely. The loincloth they wear is made of the bark of a tree, softened and hammered out until it is a long slender doth, tucked between the legs and over a belt, front and back. The women particularly like to have a long piece of cloth so that it hangs clown behind.

almost to the ground. They say it looks well when dancing.

Some of the accounts of nineteenth-century travelers in the Congo are no less fanciful, and it was George Schweinfurth who first made known to the world, in his book *The Heart of Africa*, that Pygmies not only existed but were human. He was following in the path of the Italian explorer Miani, who a few years earlier had reached the Ituri but had died before he could return. One of the most curious of little-known stories about the Pygmies is that Miani actually sent two of them back to Italy, to the Geographic Association, which had sponsored his trip. The president of the association, Count Miniscalchi of Verona, took the two boys and educated them. Contemporary newspaper reports describe them as strolling the boulevards, arm in arm with their Italian friends, chatting in Italian. One of them even learned to play the piano. From the present Count Miniscalchi I learned that both Pygmies eventually returned to Africa, where one died and the other became a saddler in the Ethiopian army. He last heard from the latter, who must then have been an old man, just before the outbreak of World War II.

Stanley describes his meetings with the Pygmies in the Ituri, but without telling us much about them, and indeed little was known beyond the actual fact of their existence until a White Father, the Reverend Paul Schebesta, set out from Vienna in the nineteen-twenties to study them.

Schebesta's first trip was an over-all survey of the forest area, in which he established the fact that this was a stronghold of the pure Pygmy, as opposed to the "Pygmoid" in other parts of the equatorial belt, where there has been intermarriage with Negro tribes. In subsequent trips Schebesta gathered material which showed that these Ituri Pygmies -- whose term for themselves, BaMbuti, he adopts -- are in fact racially distinct from the Negro peoples, Bantu and Sudanic, who live around them. This fact has been confirmed by later genetic studies, up to the present. Though we cannot be sure, it seems reasonable to assume that the BaMbuti were the original inhabitants of the great tropical rain forest stretching from the west coast right across to the open savanna country of the east, on the far side of the chain of lakes that divides the Congo from East Africa.

But when I read Schebesta's account of the Pygmies it just did not ring true when compared with my own experiences on my first trip to the Ituri. For instance, in one of his first books he says that the Pygmies are not great musicians, but that they sing only the simplest melodies and beat on drums and dance wild erotic dances. Even much later, after he had come to know the Pygmies better and had spent several years in the region, when he wrote his major work, running to several volumes, he devoted only a few pages to music, attributing little importance to it and dismissing it as simple and undeveloped. This could not have been further from the truth.

In several other ways I felt that all was not well with Schebesta's account, particularly with his description of the relationship between Pygmies and Negroes. He gave the impression that the Pygmies were dependent on the Negroes both for food and for metal products and that there was an unbreakable hereditary relationship by which a Pygmy and all his progeny were handed down in a Negro family, from father to son, and bound to it in a form

of serfdom, not only hunting but also working on plantations, cutting wood and drawing water. None of this was true of the Pygmies that I knew. But I did agree with Schebesta about the molimo (a religious festival). Although he had not seen it himself, from what he heard about it and about similar practices among other groups of Pygmies, he felt sure that it was essentially different from the practices of neighboring Negroes, however similar they might appear to be on the surface. This certainly tallied with my own experience.

The general picture that emerged from his studies was that there were, living in the Ituri Forest, some 35,000 BaMbuti Pygmies, divided into three linguistic groups, speaking dialects of three major Negro languages. The Pygmies seemed to have lost their own language, due to the process of acculturation though traces remained, especially in tonal pattern. Only in the easternmost group did Schebesta feel that the language had survived to any recognizable extent. These were the Efe Pygmies who lived among the BaLese, an eastern Sudanic tribe with a not very savory reputation for cannibalism, witchcra...

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