

BaMbuti Pygmies of the Ituri Forest in Congo Africa

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I have broken this up into sections with some of the topics overlapping others. The book was pleasant to read, I just wish I had taken the time to make notes as I read. At the time I felt it would be easy to go back over the material for the ISC.

1. SUSTINANCE: The BaMbuti are hunter gatherers at the time of Turnbull's writing. They had been trading with the Negroe villagers meat for plantation products, but for the most part they got what they needed from the jungle. "The forest is their world and in exchange for their affection and trust it supplies them with all they need (Turnbull, 14)."

They know which roots to eat and which vines to follow to these roots. They know when the rain will provide the best mushrooms to eat. The villagers, they do not see these, they walk on past them. They hunt for meat with nets that the mother may have given her son upon his marriage, and that he or his wife must now maintain. Some use spears, and others use a bow and arrow with a poison tip. Once the animal is chased and caught in the net the spear or a knife is used to quickly dispatch the animal. They hunt these animals in groups in which there may be several layers of family involved. This is why it is important in other areas to get along and make these socio-political marital ties so that there may be a successful hunt and enough food gathered. When an elephant was brought down they disbanded the camp and relocated it as it was easier than moving the downed elephant.

2. LANGUAGE: Their language is thought to be all but lost as over the years they have taken on one of three dialects of the Negroe villagers. Yet their tonal pattern seems to remain (Turnbull, 19). Their pronunciation of the vowels is clear and precise and a sing-song intonation

is present during speech. Certain syllables are emphasized and they are either higher or lower than the others. Lower is used if questioning, unlike the American vernacular of raising it during a question. The “A” is a schwa sound as in father. The “E” is a long “A” sound as in make. “I” is a long “E” sound as in sweet. “O” is a long “O” as in rose and the “U” is an “OO” as in food. The language from what I have read is somewhat clear. On page 106 Turnbull writes “Pisa me taba” which translated into “Pass me my tobacco”.

Singing and song play a large part in their language as they sing to the forest to keep it happy as they walk along, they sing while “praying”, and they sing during times of happiness and grief.

3. POLITICAL SYSTEM: The political system is rather simple and based upon respect for the camp and the forest. They do not have a chief per se, but as usual there are those that are looked upon for guidance for various reasons. Marriage intertwines into their political system as it does their hunter gathering methods. It is based upon needs. This binds families together and encourages resolution within the family. As it is in the family so be it in the camp. There are some forms of punishment ranging from minor lashings from all of those that feel they were offended to complete ostracizing from the camp for more serious offences. Such as flirting with one’s distant cousin, in which it was thought incestuous. Kelemoke did this and stayed in the forest for three days at which time he returned and all was well in the camp as if it never happened, though he never flirted with his cousin again and ended up happily married with children (Turnbull, 112).

4. FAMILY ORGANIZATION: The families are kind of separated by camps. When a woman marries a man she leaves her family and goes and lives with his family. The exception to this is if the camp does not approve of the girl and they will not accept her. This forces the man to go and live with her hunting clan that is not his own. A man may have more than one wife living with him. Once a woman gives birth and is nursing a child he is not supposed to bother her about sex. This makes the other wives happy as it gives them some attention. Parents and grandparents may live in the same camp as their offspring keeping the family close together. This also allows the parents to work on gathering food for the family. It takes a village to raise a child.

5. MYTHS: Religion and myths coincide. The Molimo is a ritual that involves singing and sometimes dancing and is performed at times of great crisis.

6. CLOTHING: Bark cloth is the main source of clothing for the pygmies (Turnbull, 130). The cloth is stripped from the trees as bark and pounded until smooth. It is dyed different colors using other plants and flowers. Depending on the type of bark used will determine the final color. The women leave a long "tail" hanging down in back because it looks nice while dancing. This is thought to be the reason for the earlier descriptions of pygmies having a tail.

A belt is worn that can take weeks to make. It will hold the loin cloth, machete, small game, plants or roots, and anything else needed to keep the hands free while walking. Some pygmies wore clothes like the negroe villagers did that were of a European design, but the loin clothes are free, given to them by the forest. A hat can be worn with the frame made of vines and the fur of small mammals like a chivot cat.

7. HISTORY: Written history from the pygmies is not available. What is available is written accounts dating back 2500 years BCE for the Egyptian Pharaoh Nefrekare. He was told of tiny people singing in the trees after he sent out a party to determine the source of the Nile River. He had given specific instructions on how he wanted them treated when they were brought to him. Whether or not they were is unknown. Homer wrote of them in the Iliad. They are considered the oldest inhabitants of the rainforest and with no written records, their verbal histories and stories will soon be filtered and lost as they become influenced from outsiders coming to clear away the rainforest. Changes surely have occurred even since this book was written 43 years ago.

8. SHELTER: The pygmy shelter is rather simple. It is a wood log framed dome with large leaves stacked like shingle with the top overlying the bottom one to keep out rain. It is the woman's hut and it is her responsibility to maintain it. It is common for the man to tell the woman to fix a leak at night if he wants to not be bothered by her for anything so that he may sleep.

At one point in the book a married couple has an argument and it escalates big time. She starts taking down the hut and packing it in because she is leaving. Apologies are considered a weakness as things are usually blown over. As he is sitting there sulking they both realize they have blown the argument way out and cannot bring themselves to resolve the argument and save "face". As she starts to take down the frame he reminds her that they need to clean the leaves free of bugs and dirt. So they carry all of the leaves down to the river and wash them and therefore recover from their argument. Even during the next week some of the other women

make a show of cleaning their leaves on their roofs, only to never do it again after this incident blew over.

The huts face each other sometimes in rows but never looking into a strangers front door. The doors may be moved and a “Spite Wall” be built between two feuding families so that their backs are to one another. They can also be altered and enlarged to accommodate family and friends visiting.

9. ADAPTIONS to the MODERN WORLD: The pygmies seemed to adapt well to the villagers. They basically pretended to believe what they believe just to continue the trading. They leave the villagers ways at the entrance to the forest. They get exploited to some extent while they also exploit the tourist and forest workers. As the forest gets smaller and they experience more of the outside world they want more. They smoke, they drink, and they pay 100% on small loans.

The part that cultural anthropology plays in this understands the differences. They were encouraged to work on the plantations so that they may prosper. They did not acclimatize to the direct sunlight and some died of heatstroke (Turnbull 260). The mosquitoes make them sick. They are people of the forest.

10. RELIGION: Ancestor worship is the main theme here. It is taboo to mention the deeds name. They do believe in a benevolent deity that they identify with the forest. It gives and it takes (Turnbull, 45). The most important part of any ritual is that it is done correctly. These rituals are to make everyone happy and the forest happy. They solve problems communally so

as not to upset the forest. The pygmies believe a dead persons soul returns to the forest to be born again.

Works Cited

Turnbull, Colin M. The Forest People. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1962.