

The Forest People

By Colin M. Turnbull

Reviewed by John Woodcock

Hunting and gathering has been the dominant mode of living for 99% of Man's time on earth. This was the way of life for the cultures that carried out the "diaspora" of mankind out of Africa and across the continents beginning some 2.5 million years ago. Only after this dispersal was complete, about 10,000 years ago, did the more settled agricultural way of life begin to develop and spread. The switch to agriculture appears to have begun with cereal cultivation in the subtropical regions (such as the Middle East) and spread through colonization to other regions, including Africa's tropics. The vast majority of cultures became agricultural, yet some cultures have maintained their hunting and gathering lifestyle despite long interaction with agriculturally based neighbors. These include, among others, Eskimos, Australian Aborigines, Kalahari Bushmen and the Pygmy tribes of central Africa.

Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People* is an engaging study of the last group, the Pygmies. Thinking about the book from the perspective of the Human Journey, certain questions arose in my mind:

If *Homo sapiens* developed outside the tropical forest, why did the Pygmies' forebears choose to return?

How much of the hunting/agriculture choice was affected by changes in climate?

How and why did/do the Pygmies "resist" becoming agricultural?

How much can we assume about the similarity between the Pygmies of today and their hunting and gathering forebears of long ago?

Is there among modern lifestyles anything that bears a resemblance to, or parallels in some way, hunting and gathering?

The Pygmies are then one of the few "remnant" hunting and gathering cultures existing in the world today. Evidence of "genetic distance" (see sources below) also points to the Pygmies' being descendent from the "original" human inhabitants of the rainforest. Regardless of whether this is accurate, they do provide a living example of a non-agricultural culture with special characteristics:

- Small groups whose optimal size depends on their hunting strategy
- Possessors of detailed environmental knowledge, enabling them to anticipate the availability of their food sources and avoid danger
- Flexibility of roles (women also hunt and men also gather) and hierarchy
- Relatively simple ritual life
- Highly cooperative groups with leadership based for the most part on individual capability

Such a relatively dry description of the Pygmies as the above can be found in numerous sources. Colin Turnbull's now classic work (first published in 1961) makes

the world of the Pygmies of the Ituri forest in northeastern Zaire (then called the Belgian Congo) come alive for the reader and his “story-telling” style makes the book almost as much a “page-turner” as a good novel. He relates his experiences as an anthropology researcher with a particular Pygmy tribe comprising a number of interrelated families. We learn their names and come to know the character of each family member.

Turnbull begins by introducing the (Western) reader to the world of the Pygmies. He shows how our “instinctive” fear of the dark forest is similar to that of the Bantu villagers, whose dwellings border the Ituri forest where the Pygmies live. This is the reaction of someone brought up in a settled, agricultural culture who is ignorant of the ways of the forest. He then slowly reveals how this same forest looks through the eyes of the BaMbuti (“Ba” means ‘tribe’), as the Pygmies are referred to in this area of the Congo. We learn how their intimate knowledge of where and when to look for many kinds of food and how to behave to prevent predator attacks turns the “hostile” rainforest environment into a friendly one.

The Mbuti Pygmies are semi-nomadic, living in a series of camps consisting of quickly built houses, which are effective shelters for a number of months. The location of the camps depends generally on a yearly cycle of nutritional and social needs. The timing of the shifts between camps is not rigidly set but can be triggered by the tribe's reaction to events.

When we first meet the BaMbuti, they are camped on the edge of the forest next to a Bantu village. Here Turnbull sketches out the relationship between the Pygmies, who have lived in the forest for many thousands of years (perhaps since the last ice age, 10,000 years ago) and the more recently arrived agricultural tribes, which arrived no earlier than the development of iron at the beginning of the Christian era.

Cultures Connected

The practical reason supporting contact between the two groups is the trading of game caught by the Pygmies for the villagers’ agricultural produce and tools. However, this connection is maintained by a far more complex relationship, which includes the differing attitudes each group has towards the other, as well as their joint participation in two rituals (burial and male initiation). The Pygmies also speak a dialect of the local Bantu language, having apparently lost their own language through a process of acculturation.

The loss of language and the villagers’ dominance in jointly-performed rituals have led early researchers to believe that the BaMbuti are dominated by the culture of their Negro neighbors, despite the fact that the two groups are genetically completely distinct. Turnbull is at pains to point out that much of the older fieldwork on the Pygmies was done in the villages and in the presence of villagers. In this study, he conducts fieldwork by spending most of his time alone with the Pygmies in their forest camps, and this results in the very different picture seen in this text.

The Negro villagers view themselves as teachers and guides in their relationship with “their” BaMbuti. As a result of this attitude, they control and direct any ritual carried out together and also encourage the Pygmies to copy them, and, for example, establish their own “plantations.” For their part, the Pygmies “do what they are told” and generally maintain a passive, submissive attitude in the presence of the villagers. However, as soon as we see how the Pygmies behave when they are alone, we understand that they are “playing a part.” They completely abandon the village ways,

which they seemed to be adopting and steal from the villagers' plantations, rather than making any real effort to farm.

As far as the BaMbuti are concerned, the villagers are inferior, since they are not "of the forest." They often use the words for "savage" and "animal" when referring to the villagers, and the Negro villagers use the same terms when referring to the Pygmies. The BaMbuti come to the village for certain specific needs, either ritualistic or physical (trading game for produce). However, they are always drawn back to the forest and their intense connection with it is maintained by their "molimo" ritual, described later.

One Ritual, Two Points of View

Here is an example of the way in which a shared ritual both connects and divides the two cultures. At the end of the mourning period following a death, there must be a great feast according to the villagers' customs. Since the villagers provide much of the food for this feast, the Pygmies like to bury their dead at the village. They even allow the villagers to direct the burial procedure. On the other hand, the two groups view death very differently, with the Negroes believing that no death is natural. When they try to get the Pygmies to point out the enemies of the dead person who might be responsible for a killing curse, the Pygmies simply refuse to cooperate, since for them, death is a natural fact of life.

The village initiation for boys, the *nkumbi*, is another example showing clearly the differing motivation of the two cultural groups despite their cooperation. For the villagers, this ceremony not only marks the passage from boyhood to manhood, but also maintains their connection with the dead, as only the initiated will join the ancestors when they die. The villagers put out considerable expense and effort to ensure that the Pygmy boys are initiated along with their own. For the villagers, this helps maintain their dominance over the Pygmies since they believe that the ritual "binds" the Pygmy initiate to the village throughout his life and even after death.

As before, the Pygmies' attitude towards the *nkumbi* is very different. They subject themselves to it since it is the only way they can receive the status of adults in the eyes of the village. However, when the initiated eight-year-old boys return to the forest, they revert to being children. Becoming a man for the BaMbuti is more dependent on practical concerns: a boy proves himself capable of supporting a family by killing his first real game and proves himself a man by participation in the *elima* festival (discussed below), in which girls who have reached menstruation indicate preferences among the young men.

The Forest Song

During the time that the Pygmies are camped next to the village, Balekimito, one of the female elders of the tribe, dies. In a discussion following her burial, the BaMbuti agree that "she died well" and that her death was "a big thing" and "a matter for the forest." They decide to have a special *molimo* feast "to make the forest happy." This can only be done in the forest and in any case the tribe feels they have been too long in the village and must go back to "where we belong." Within a few days, they pack up and leave to make a new camp along a river some hours' walk into the forest. Turnbull, walking with a group of young men, penetrates deeper into the forest, and along the way we begin to learn about forest life. As the BaMbuti walk through the forest, they become more relaxed and carefree as they are surrounded by their primal

element. At the same time, they are highly alert. Any opportunity to stalk game or forage for mushroom roots or edible plants is immediately exploited. By the time the Pygmies have arrived at their campsite, enough food has been gathered for the first few days. Fire is not lit but renewed at every stop, using smoldering embers wrapped in fire-resistant leaves and carried by the women. Despite it being a tropical area, it is cool under the thick forest canopy, and fire is an essential tool for warmth as well as cooking.

The first order of business in the new camp is that of dwellings, whose sites are chosen by each family group as they arrive. Building materials are collected locally and the houses are constructed of branches and interwoven leaves sealed against rain. Stragglers are helped by those who finish first, and by the time an evening rainstorm rolls in, everyone is under shelter. The BaMbuti are established in the first of a number of forest camps that they will occupy during the year and are ready to begin their *molimo*.

One of Turnbull's major contributions to the understanding of Pygmy culture was his discovery of the importance of singing for them. Singing is part of their daily life in the forest as well as part of all the rituals they perform when they are not in the village. The most important of these is the *molimo*, in which the BaMbuti sing to the forest. The *molimo* can last from a few days to months, depending on the occasion. It is sung to restore the tribe's connection to the forest and "make the forest happy," generally after some crisis, such as a death or a period of bad hunting.

The *molimo* takes place from the evening until late at night and is carried out by the older men who sit around a fire and sing songs of praise to the forest. In reply, the forest also "sings," with sounds varying from animal-like growls to high, melodious sounds. These sounds appear to come from a source moving through the forest, sometimes near the village, sometimes far away, and sometimes from right inside the village next to the *molimo* fire. The sounds are created by the best singer among the young men of the tribe using a "trumpet," which can be made of wood or metal (here the Pygmies use a piece of drain-pipe). A group of young men accompany the singer, both to carry the trumpet and to hide it with their bodies from the eyes of those who are forbidden to see it (mainly women and girls). For the BaMbuti, the *molimo* evokes their intense love for the forest, which is their provider and protector: in a real sense, their deity.

Another essential element of the *molimo* is the fire, which is positioned centrally in the camp and called the *fire of life*. Fire is regarded by the BaMbuti as the most precious gift they receive from the forest, and thus the *molimo* fire is a sacred fire. This is one of the few areas in Pygmy life where the division of sexual roles seems complete: women are forbidden to see the *molimo* trumpet or take part in the singing around the fire. One night, however, Turnbull reports being witness to the ritual destruction of fire and "binding of the *molimo*" by a visiting woman elder who must be given gifts in order to be mollified. He also reports a legend that women originally "owned" fire and that the men "stole" it. This seems to reflect a sort of social contract surrounding the use of fire and the summoning of the *molimo*, and the women's acquiescence to the situation, which must on occasion be renewed ritually.

Elima

Elima is the Bantu word for female coming of age marked by the first appearance of menstrual blood. Both the villagers and the Pygmies use the same word, but unlike the

nkumbi, they carry out the *elima* activities separately, and their attitudes towards this important event in a young woman's life are completely different.

For the villagers, blood of any kind is both a terrible and a powerful thing associated with sickness, injury and death. The added mystery of menstrual blood means that its appearance is considered an evil omen, placing the girl and her family in danger. She is placed in seclusion, during which she is required to name the boy responsible for her condition, the assumption being that only illicit intercourse could have brought this about. This leads to an accusation, negotiations with the boy's family and possibly betrothal. In any case, the danger is thought to remain until the girl is married. The whole process is considered shameful, dangerous and best concealed.

For the Pygmies, despite the connection of blood with dreadful events, menstrual blood means life, since the girl is now a potential mother. There is no fear or suspicion, and everyone is told the good news, saying she has been "blessed with the blood." There is a period of seclusion but it is one of happy preparation, and the girl takes her friends with her, including those who have not reached maturity and some who have. In this "elima house," a respected older relative gives motherhood lessons, including learning adult women's songs. Pygmies come to visit from near and far, including interested young men, who stay outside the house but take part in special *elima* songs. In all, the *elima* is one of the happiest occasions for a Pygmy tribe.

Then and Now

What can we learn about the Human Journey from the BaMbuti Pygmies? First we must examine the assumption that the hunting and gathering cultures of today, like the BaMbuti, are similar in their characteristics to such cultures in the distant past. Though it is very tempting to see these cultures as a "window to the past," these "remnants" are **living** and not frozen ones. This means that they have continued to change and adapt to changes in their surroundings. Living surrounded by agricultural societies, for example, has had profound effects on the Pygmies, some of which have been described above.

Another considerable difference between the environment of the ancient hunting and gathering societies and those of today relates to the type of game available for hunting then and now. In late Pleistocene times, some 100,000 years ago, there were many species of very large game animals available. Between that time and the arrival of humans in the new world over 10,000 years ago, a great many of these large species became extinct. Some archeologists think that hunting pressure from an expanding human population was a deciding factor in these extinctions, though climatic changes are also implicated (see sources below).

Whatever the cause, humans had to adapt to what was for them a gradual but highly significant change in food source characteristics. Both the development of agriculture and the development of modern hunter-gatherer societies can be seen as different results of this adaptation. For the hunter-gatherers this meant that their hunting efforts produced results in "smaller packages" and that foraging for other food sources gained importance. There is evidence that this change affected not only sex roles, but also the average body size of adults and size differences between men and women.

We can thus look upon present-day hunter-gatherer societies as an aid in thinking about the lives of Pleistocene hunter-gatherers, rather than a direct reflection of the culture of the earlier groups.

The study of the BaMbuti reveals the extremely intimate relationship between the hunting and gathering tribe and the ecosystem of which it is a part. The outer expression of this is the Pygmies' ability to exploit a broad range of resources, from fruit to mushrooms to honey, in addition to hunting. However, the importance of their connection to their "geography" is most emphasized when it becomes clear that the forest in which they live is in fact their god.

This very strong attachment to a particular landscape is also clear in Turnbull's later book about the Ki culture, "The Mountain People." The Ki tribe can hardly be described as having a benign relationship with its environment. They refuse to abandon their tribal area despite the fact that they are starving. This geographical attachment is one factor that must have affected the lives and choices of human hunter-gatherers as they spread southward into Africa during the last ice age. This also raises the question of how such a "spreading" took place. For example, I am tempted to speculate that the tradition that women Pygmies first "owned" the molimo is an indication that women first "connected" with the forest. Perhaps women initiated the return to more forested areas during dryer glacial times because of greater food sources to be gathered there.

Intertwined with this attachment to place is an almost unbelievably strong attachment to the way of living evidenced in both studies of the BaMbuti and the Ki. Both these attachments clearly aid the hunter-gatherers in "resisting" the pressures to become agricultural and maintaining their way of life. If so, then how is it that cultural "revolutions," such as the switch to agriculture, occur? These central "turning points" of the human journey are vast and complex, but one of their facets is clear in the words of a BaMbuti elder: "When the Forest dies, we die." Many today are familiar with the ecological principle that species are most often driven to extinction by the loss of their environmental niche or living space. A parallel process would be the taking over of a landscape by an agricultural culture, effectively eliminating or pushing out a neighboring group of hunter-gatherers. This is supported by the fact that in many environments, agriculture supports a greater population density. The places in which cultivation is difficult, tropical, desert and arctic, are where hunter-gatherer cultures have survived.

The case of the Pygmies shows that even long-term contact and exchange with agricultural cultures doesn't necessarily cause the "conversion" of the hunter-gatherers. In fact, mutual attitudes of derision and exploitation help maintain the groups culturally distinct. This is illustrated by their differing attitudes and interpretations of rituals performed together, such as *nkumbi* and burial rites, and their totally contrasting attitudes towards girls' coming of age.

Life Strategies

Isn't the agricultural/hunting dichotomy somewhat misleading, like all dichotomies? For example, there is a great deal of evidence that men were using fire to open up dense bush and improve the browse to attract game, long before the beginning of settled agriculture. Slash-and-burn agriculture, still practiced in some tropical areas, can be seen as a life strategy located somewhere between settled agriculture and hunting and gathering. Looking from such a perspective, one can understand that even the "switch" to agriculture is not likely to have happened with the suddenness that the word implies, but is likely to have been a gradual transition with many intervening stages.

It would thus seem more accurate to view agriculture and hunting as two ends of a continuum with a broad variety of choices in between in which the land is more or less intensely managed. Examples of such alternatives have been developed in the last few decades and include approaches such as permaculture and agroforestry (see sources). A recent edition of the agroforestry electronic newsletter “The Overstory,” entitled “Wild Foods,” features a discussion centering on the fact that hunting and gathering remains an important component of the livelihoods of agricultural peoples.

To take an even broader perspective, one can view much of the change in human cultures as involving the development of new tools and ideas, which thereafter become part of human heritage with the potential for application. Today, hunting, fishing, and gathering various wild foods (e.g. berries and mushrooms) are highly valued recreational activities. In a more abstract sense, the hunting and gathering mind-set seems part of the “equipment” of young adults searching for their way and even tourists looking for cultural roots from which to refresh their lives.

Parallel to the change in food resources faced by early hunter-gatherers, modern societies today face a man-made crisis in natural resources. Perhaps by exploring the broad range of life strategies stretching between ancient hunting and gathering and modern industrial agriculture, we can begin to define for ourselves some less destructive choices in the way we live.

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