

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

DER - 37
Pigmy Hunt

March 3, 1955
M. David's Hotel
Epulu River Station
Belgian Congo

Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
522 Fifth Avenue
New York 36, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

When the pigmies of the Ituri forest go on a hunt, there are no scenes of brave hunters bidding farewell to wives and children. Everybody goes on a pigmy hunt---young men, old men, tiny boys and girls, women with babies in hip slings and even toothless old harpies. The whole village turns out for the event and it is a big holiday for these miniature people.

The pigmies use no spears or bows and arrows when they go after small game. Instead they string a long net through the forest. Then they circle around and, whooping and hollering, drive the game into the net. The bigger animals usually manage to get over it. But for the smaller ones it is only a short time before they wind up over a forest fire with dozens of pigmies squatting around licking their chops impatiently.

Yesterday morning a pigmy village staged one such hunt for us. They did so for a price, at the behest of Monsieur David, a wiry, hawk-faced Belgian who runs a hotel here on the banks of the Epulu River, in the heart of the Ituri forest. David quoted the price as 1,000 Congo francs or about \$20 and it may well have included a commission for our sharp-eyed hotelier.

The pigmies were waiting for us at half past eleven a short distance down the road. There were about 60 of them, none any higher than my chest, and all were chattering excitedly. The men were carrying rolled up nets over their shoulders and---although they wouldn't need them---some bows and arrows as well. The bows are tiny---only two feet long---but the pigmies are tiny people. They range from around four feet to around five feet in stature.

Some of the men wore shorts, in the European fashion, but no one had a shirt. Most of the men were content with a loin cloth, and a small one at that. The women wore loin cloths or bits of leaves and grass, and they all had painted their faces and bodies with blue designs.

The pigmies trotted off down a path into the forest with us in pursuit. The Ituri is one of the great primeval wildernesses of Africa. It quickly closed in about us, a choking mass of trees and undergrowth.

After we had gone 200 yards down the path, the pigmies plunged noisily into the thickets. We battered and pushed our way after them, for once a little envious of their size. They are so small that they were able to walk under the brambles without ducking.

We went only a few hundred yards and the pigmies stopped. They unrolled their nets quickly, strung them from bush to bush and tied them end to end. Soon the net stretched out for 500 yards in a semi-circle. David, to whom this was old stuff, found himself a reasonably soft patch of brush and collapsed onto it. "You are guaranteed at least one antelope today," he said between yawns. "Maybe you will get more."

Most of the pigmies had disappeared into the undergrowth. "They will go out a quarter of a mile or a half mile, then they will come back," said David. The men who remained behind stood like sentries at every 50 feet along the net. The forest became quiet.

I waited next to one of the sentries. I could see only 15 feet or so into the dense undergrowth. There was very little light there on the forest floor. A tangle of greenery rose overhead, broken here and there by a shaft of sunlight. It was hot. I wondered when the beaters would start their drive. But there was no point in asking the pigmy. Swahili is spoken by large numbers of Africans in the eastern Congo but only a handful of the primitive pigmies know more than a few words of it. Neither do they know French. We waited in perspiring silence.

The little man in front of me, on guard at his sector of the net, stood motionless. I gave him a cigaret and he smiled shyly. Another pigmy joined us and they shared the cigaret, whispering to each other in low tones.

The pigmies sock travelers for a good price before they pose for photographs but on the whole they are kind and gentle people. You see them along the road through the forest and around the infrequent villages. They always look as if they were hurt and bewildered. The other Africans are either the same size or only a little taller than the pigmies---presumably as a result of interbreeding---but they despise them. They say the pigmies are not "real people."

Two days previously we stopped at a mission station and a group of diminutive real people gathered around as we talked with some American missionaries. Two pigmies came down the road and the missionary called them over. I asked a "real person" who was the same size as the pigmies if he was a pigmy too. The real people hooted in derision at the suggestion while the two pigmies stood there looking dejected and waiting to be told they could go.

The real people regard themselves as a master race and each one has a pigmy who helps him tend his garden and does odd jobs for him. Is it slavery? "Oh, no," a real person said. "The reason they work for us is that we help them. We give them food and clothing." The real people jeer at their little helpers and even refuse to sit next to them in the mission churches. It seems that the pigmies too are convinced that they are not as good as real people.

In the forest, the pigmy has no real people to depress him. There are only the other pigmies and the animals. The pigmies next

to me at the net had none of the hang-dog look they otherwise have. They are tiny and despised but even the elephant falls before them in the forest. The pigmies creep up behind an elephant and slash the tendons of his hind legs. The elephant falls and the pigmies finish him off with spears.

It seemed like a long time but only five minutes passed before the drive started. The sentries darted back and forth with nervous glee, ready to grab and truss up the first animal to hit the net. A chorus of dozens of tiny voices came through the forest. It sounded like Indian war whoops uttered under water. The noise was punctuated by shouts, laughter and the beating of branches. Now the beaters were only a hundred yards away. We expected to see an animal break out of the brush at any moment.

Instead the face of a pigmy woman appeared. The drive had netted nothing. Shouting to each other, the pigmies quickly rolled up the nets, the women adjusted the babies in the hip slings and we were off again through the forest.

Ten minutes later the nets were restrung. The pigmies are anything but silent hunters and amid the uproar of sixty tiny voices, the beaters went out again. David found himself another soft spot and sprawled out and ate a sandwich. Then from the distance came the gurgled whoops. The drive was on again.

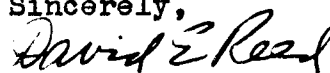
Five pandemonious minutes passed and then came whoops of victory. A small forest buck had run into the net and had wound itself tightly in the strands. The pigmies extracted it and carried it to us. "Now you have seen how it is done," said David. "You can eat the animal tonight if you wish." The buck squealed in terror as a pigmy held it upside down by the legs.

The idea of eating the howling animal was not too enticing. We told David to let it go. "Yes, I think that is the best idea," he said. He translated it into pigmy-talk. The pigmies grunted in outrage at the suggestion. David was firm. The pigmies held onto the buck until they saw that le monsieur was not joking. Reluctantly they let the tiny animal go. It ran straight into the net, tangling itself up again. David bent down and extracted it carefully, then lifted it over the net and released it again. It was gone in a second.

We walked back to the car, the 60 pigmies straggled out behind us. "Oh, what those pigmies are saying," David said. "It makes my ears burn. They tell each other, 'Why do they want us to do all that work just to let it go? What crazy people are these, throwing all that good meat away?'"

The pigmies gathered in a semi-circle as we got into the car to drive away. Some climbed onto a little mound of earth to get a better look at us. Yes, they seemed to be telling each other, les blancs are certainly crazy.

Sincerely,



David E. Reed