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Pygmies of the Ituri Forest

Hotel Okapi--Ituri Forest  
En route to Stanleyville,  
Belgian Congo  
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Dear Mr. Rogers:

When you offer an African and his family a ride in the Belgian Congo's Ituri Forest it's a mistake to ask, "How many people will come with you?" He'll answer, all right, saying "two" or "three" and perhaps mentioning his brother or his wife and child. Casting a quick glance at the seating capacity of your car, you may agree. But at the time of departure he is likely to show up with 10 or 15 people in tow, a placid look on his face and a bundle in his hand. "But," you'll sputter, "you said that there would be only two or three people."

Patiently, the African will explain that there are only two or three people, introducing his brother or pointing out his wife and child.

"Then who are these others?" you'll ask, pointing to the crowd.

"Oh," will come the answer, "these are not people. They are bambutu."

In two short sentences the African will have explained the position of approximately 40,000 pygmies who live in the choked green forests and the back yards of African villages in the densely wooded Belgian Congo just north of the Equator. He will have explained the reaction that Dave Reed got when he asked a short African standing with a group of his friends in front of a mission station if he were a bambutu. A loud hoot of mingled embarrassment and laughter went up from the Africans and the missionary with whom we had been talking looked grave. "It's the worst insult possible," he said, "to call a Native a bambutu. The Natives consider the pygmies animals, not people. They even refuse to sit beside one in church."

In the old days, the African would have explained farther. He would have told you that the bambutu belonged to him--that they were his to use, exploit, beat, pet and take into concubinage. In short, he would have explained that the pygmies were slaves. Today, the tune has changed although the melody lingers on. Africans explain carefully that the pygmies "help" them plant gardens, hunt food and keep house. They look hurt when you suggest that the pygmies belong to them, reflecting the official Belgian attitude that slavery is a thing of the past and has, in fact, ceased to exist in the vine-tangled hinterland of the Ituri Forest.

American missionaries in the Forest are also shocked at the situation. They are likely to bemoan the cruel slavery, condemn the wicked system and claim that pygmies aren't the brave, independent people they used to be since many of them embraced Islam. After this tirade, the missionary is quick to assure you that although he disagrees with the way of life led by the pygmies, he does nothing about it. To do so would be to incur the wrath of Belgian officialdom--something that just isn't done by people who are at all anxious to remain in the Belgian Congo.

The only group which does not seem particularly aware of the views of the outside world on slavery are the pygmies. The story is told that they believe themselves

descended from dogs and accept the proposition that they are more animal than human. Their bondage has gone on for as long as they can remember--back to the days of Stanley and the Belgian occupation and even before. Mrs. Anne Putnam, in her book on her life with the pygmies, reports that the pygmies call full-sized human beings "real people," implying that they do not quite make the grade themselves.

To my eyes, used to the sight of tall Zulus and normal-sized Swazis, Xosas and Matabele, they do not seem like real people either. There are little pygmies and big pygmies--ranging in height from a little under four feet tall to just over five feet. Most of them seem to fall about the mean--four feet six inches--and are perfectly formed as far as hands, feet, head size and overall proportions are concerned. Their standards of beauty are not those of a Dior model or a Marilyn Monroe. They run more to protuberant bellies and decorating their bare bodies with fancy patterns in black paint.

They are of a lighter color than the Bantu and have "prettier" features--eyes set wide apart, straight noses, thin lips, smooth, round faces and erect carriage. The young pygmy women are well-formed and have what can best be described as a forthright manner--a fact which may well account for the unusually short stature of the "real people." The Native Africans of the Ituri Forest are much shorter than any other Bantu I've seen in Africa.

Belgian officials are extremely reluctant to divulge information about the pygmies. The District Officer I queried in Mambasa, on the western edge of the Forest, refused to say a word without an expressly stated letter of authority from the Provincial Governor in Stanleyville. He sat in his brick office and squirmed under my questions, a tic screwing up the left side of his face and his epaulets moving in mighty heaves as he shrugged his inability to help me. This attitude is typical of the Belgian officials I've met--they seem terrified of reprisals from above and it is probably significant that their badges of rank are thin strips of brass which apparently can be pinned or unpinned with great ease.

For the information I was able to gather I was forced to resort to missionaries and Belgian private citizens who do their work and live their lives in the forest in relatively close contact with pygmies.

Pygmies are hunters. For the most part they hunt for their African owners, trapping small animals by driving them into nets and killing larger animals with their spears and arrows. If the African who receives the meat feels so inclined, he may give a bit of the animal to the pygmy who has trapped it. Otherwise he must work overtime to get a bit of meat for his own pot. Pygmies are also paid by their masters in vegetables and fruits from the gardens behind every African village along the main road, from Beni to Stanleyville, which runs through the heart of the forest. Pygmies do no cultivation of their own.

According to the missionaries, pygmies are a superstitious lot. Mr. Deens, a missionary who has been in the Congo since 1930 as representative of an American denomination called the Brethren, was particularly emphatic on this point, though much of his emphasis may have stemmed from the fact that he has been remarkably unsuccessful in turning pygmies into Christians. He said that there may be one or two hundred Christians among the pygmies but that he could only claim six firm converts with any certainty. This would not speak too well for Deens' efforts

among the Africans, for in general the pygmies adopt the religion and/or beliefs of their "owners." Deens would probably explain that the true convert to Christianity would immediately free his slaves.

Traditionally, pygmies are shy, unspoiled creatures of nature who shun contact with the outside world and live wild, nomadic lives in the depths of the forests. It is certainly rare to find pygmies walking along the roads or sitting in the villages watching automobiles go by as the Africans do. Many pygmies, currently on active duty with Africans, live in little huts behind the villages away from the road, but the great majority live in the woods themselves, moving from place to place.

As far as shyness and the state of being unaffected children of nature are concerned, pygmies have seen the light. No longer do they run at the sight of a European. They gaze on automobiles and trucks with a sophisticated and jaundiced eye and have learned the first lesson of a picturesque people--that Europeans with cameras are a lively source of income and no photographer should be allowed to get away unscathed. The current asking rate for pictures is 20 francs (US 40¢) and there are practiced howls and long faces when they receive the inevitable dirty five franc note.

In other ways, progress has not come to the Ituri Forest. Pigmy clothing is still traditional--a breechclout and a handfull of feathers--although it is liable to be made of castoff gunny sacks than the skins of animals. Their language still consists of limited grunts and snorts, although some of them are using a few Swahili words. They are untouched by the politician's harangue, the physician's hypodermic and the English bicycle. They do not take easily to education in the mission schools and only a small handfull can read or write or do primary arithmetic.

For reasons that are probably economic, the pygmies are monogamists. It is hard enough for a pygmy to feed himself, let alone a covey of wives. And there is little advantage in keeping several wives for the increased number of daughters they might produce to be offered as wives under the libola (bride-price) system of South African Natives. The offspring of a pygmy automatically become the property of his African owner and, like himself, are included in the estate of a deceased African to be divided among his heirs.

The attitude of the ordinary Belgian citizen is best summed up by Monsieur J. David, the proprietor of our Ituri Forest hotel. "They are nothing but animals," he says in his heavily accented English. "They cannot work for a long time--after six, seven weeks I say to them 'allez.' Then I tell my Native, go find me 30; 40 pygmies for work. They do some work for six weeks--then they go to rest in the forest. They live like pigs. They are like little children; today you give them one plate chocolate--tomorrow they want two. Next day four." His thinking is similar to that of most Europeans about most Africans, all over sub-Saharan Africa.

It is hard to condemn the Belgian government for failing to put an end to the benign slavery of African over pygmy. Under the Belgian policy of limited laissez-faire--allowing Africans to develop fairly freely along their own lines to the limits of their ability--more attention must be paid to the Africans who are capable of assimilating western book learning and political ideas of equality. The time is long distant when a District Commissioner will have time, energy and patience enough to devote to the uplifting of the pygmies. They are bound to have

developed a deep-seated inferiority complex as a people--the descended-from-dogs theory emphasizes this--and a pygmy in a European hotel room looks as frightened as a forest antelope in a pygmy net.


A short time ago a representative of Ringling Brothers Barnum and Bailey Circus passed through the Ituri Forest. He suggested that a contingent of 12 or 15 pygmies be sent to the United States next year to make the March-November trip with the Circus. The thought of these poor, frightened little people suffering through the biting cold of New York in February and the stares and jibes of a curious throng of American thrill seekers is painful.

But perhaps it is indicative of the fate in store for the pygmies. They can only expect to be considered freaks by the Europeans and inhuman by the Africans. They can do nothing but look forward and backward to slavery. Their small number will render them impotent in demanding better treatment, special schools and housing projects, if and when they become aware of a need for these things.

Eventually the Belgians will get around to "freeing the pygmies." After that, no one can say what will happen. Considering their remoteness from the rest of the world, both in physique and in their primitive way of living and thinking, perhaps the most humane plan would be to turn the Ituri Forest into an area reserved for their use, allowing them to follow their traditional pattern as nomadic hunters while leaving open the path towards modern civilization if they wish to take it.

Some of them will wish to take it. A Belgian police officer once found a drunk pygmy in the road and took him to the police station to sober up. All through the night the pygmy kept repeating, over and over, "I'm not a pygmy; I'm a person." It will be a long time, however, before this drunken wish can come true.

Sincerely,



Peter Bird Martin

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