

Peoples of the forest

'Today, we don't recognise the forest any more, we don't understand it. The logging companies destroy the forest... Our children have no future. Where will they find the animals to hunt? The bark, the leaves and the fruits for food and medicine? We ask the Government not to forget us, to do something so that our life today and tomorrow will not be as black as a night without stars. Protect us, protect the forest.'
Jeanne Silpen, of the Bakola people, Cameroun

In the forests of central Africa live the peoples who together are generally known as 'Pygmies', (though many of them dislike the name since it is often used as a term of contempt). The different 'Pygmy' peoples are widely separated and speak different languages. All, however, share the same deep relationship with the forest which is their home – except in those places, like Rwanda, where the forest no longer exists.

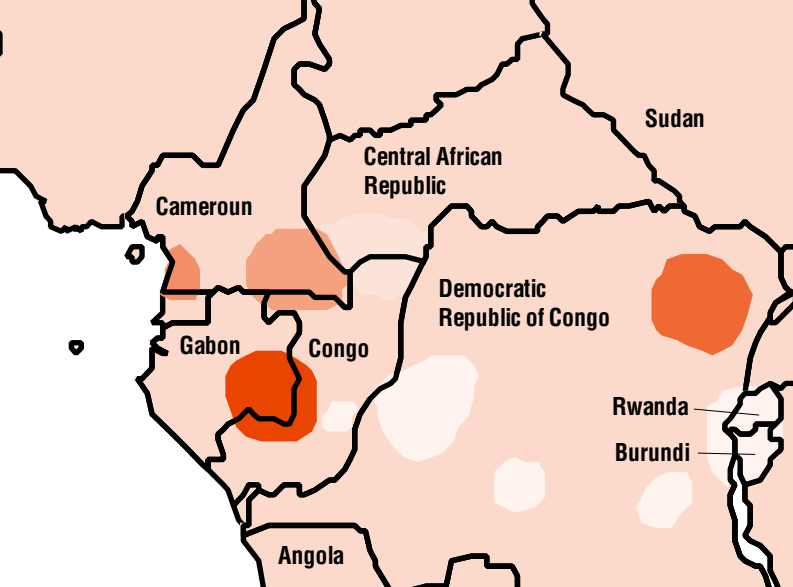
They number perhaps 250,000 altogether, and live in all the central African countries: the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC, formerly Zaire), Congo, Cameroun, Gabon, the Central African Republic, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. Their average height is about 1.5 m (4' 8"), though some groups are taller. The languages they use are derived from those of neighbouring peoples; however, certain shared words which are not borrowed suggest that they once had a common language. It is not certain whether they were the original inhabitants of the forest, or whether they moved there alongside the farmers and

fishers who expanded from what is now central Cameroun after about 3,000 BC. At all events, the ancestors of the present day 'Pygmies' exchanged forest produce with these farmers for food crops, iron and pottery, setting up a relationship which continues to this day.







From West to East the main 'Pygmy' peoples are: the Bakola or Bagyeli of the Cameroun coast (4,000); the Baka of southeastern Cameroun, Congo and Gabon (40,000 - 50,000); the Babongo of Gabon and Congo (2,000); the Ba-aka or Babenjele of CAR and northern Congo (8,000 - 10,000); the various Batwa or Basua groups of DRC; the Bambuti and Efe of the Ituri forest in the northeast of the DRC (30,000 - 40,000); and the Batwa of Rwanda and Burundi (perhaps 20,000). (The figures are rough estimates.) There are also a number of other smaller groups.

To varying degrees groups such as the Baka, the Ba-aka and the Bambuti still spend long periods of time in the forest, gathering its plants and hunting its animals. Everything they own has to be carried when they move to a new hunting camp, so it is useful to have few possessions. What they do have in abundance is an intimate knowledge of the forest: the ability to read animal tracks, to know the flowering and fruiting cycles of plants, to locate a bees' nest from the flight of a bee. They know the individual properties of thousands of plants for food or medicine. Indeed, scientific studies have shown them to be nutritionally better off than most other





Forest Peoples

| | |
|---|-----------------|
|  | Bakola/ Baggeli |
|  | Baka |
|  | Mbuti |
|  | Babongo |
|  | Batwa/Basua |
|  | Ba-aka |

peoples of sub-Saharan Africa. They see the forest as a personal god, fruitful and kind, and enact their relationship with it and with the spirits of the forest in ritual and song.

All of them spend part of the year settled near farming villages. They work in the villagers' gardens and provide them with forest produce such as meat and honey in return for food, alcohol, and sometimes small cash payments. Nowadays this period of settlement is tending to get longer. Relations between hunter-gatherers and farmers today range from free exchange to virtual serfdom. Farmers have an ambivalent attitude towards the hunter-gatherers: seeing them on the one hand as slaves and barely human and on the other as having occult wisdom and powers; they are widely consulted as magicians and healers.

None of the 'Pygmy' peoples have any 'chiefs' or formal system of government. They have, however, a clear system of traditional rights to the forest territories where they live and hunt. They live in bands of between 15 and 60 people; within the band, each individual, man or woman, is responsible for his or her own action; but there is also much cooperation in hunting, in music and dance and child care. Quarrels and disputes are worked out by humour and ritual – or by simply separating.

Today the independence and culture of all the 'Pygmy' peoples are in danger, above all because of the threat to the forests. The main threats are:

Political Violence

Often 'Pygmy' peoples are caught up in violence not of their own making. The Batwa of Rwanda and Burundi are suffering appallingly in the ethnic conflicts and genocide, and it remains to be seen how those of the DRC have been affected by the upheavals there.

Logging

With West Africa's forests all but finished, exploitation has moved into the vast Central African region; Cameroun is particularly affected. Most logging firms are European, but now companies from Malaysia also moving in. Logging degrades the forest, depriving people of the plants on which they rely and by opening up new roads, lets in commercial hunters, who kill off the animals to supply the demand for 'bushmeat' in urban areas.

Landless farmers

These move into the forest, often in the wake of logging developments. Generally they are driven by poverty and dispossession, like those made landless in the Kivu region of the DRC, who moved into the

Ituri forest. They take up land (eventually causing deforestation) and bring a more commercial way of life. The 'Pygmies' are increasingly drawn into the new world of the immigrants, at first as hunters selling their meat, but before long reduced to working as labourers.

National parks and wildlife reserves

Generally all inhabitants have been removed from within park boundaries. However, this policy is beginning to change and in some parks, such as the Dzanga-Ndoki in CAR, efforts are made to employ local people, including the Ba-aka 'Pygmies', for instance as guides.

Government policies

The nation states in which the 'Pygmies' live do not recognise that they have any legal right to the forest lands that are their home, although international law recognises such claims.

All the 'Pygmy' peoples have suffered intense pressures, first from colonial governments and then from the independent African states, to abandon their forest life and become farmers. This is supposed to 'integrate' them into the life of the nation. But as hunter-gatherers they are already part of the economic life of the nation via their economic and exchange relationships. Governments and others need to be convinced that there is room for them to continue their role of 'forest specialists' if they wish to do so. There is also a role for training in farming and other occupations, for those who wish to combine them with hunting and gathering, or for those who have already lost their forest way of life, so that they can continue to live independently.

Today the 'Pygmy' peoples are increasingly drawn into the mainstream of national life, though generally at the lowest level, as underpaid labourers. However, they are also becoming increasingly conscious of this exploitation. To date there has been almost no political organisation among them; but the Batwa of Rwanda, who set up their own association in the early 1990s, and the small self-help organisation

CODEBABIK started by the Bagyeli of Cameroun in 1996, may point the way to the future.

For the 'Pygmy' people today, Survival advocates, firstly, a halt to the destruction of their forest environment, secondly, legal acceptance of their rights to it and thirdly, recognition of their rights as equal citizens in their various states.

Background Reading

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Serge Bahuchet: *Les Pygmées Aka et la Forêt Centrafricaine* (SELAF, 1985).
Justin Kenrick: *'People of the African Forests' in Jungles and Rainforests*
Ed. Norman Myers (Weldon Owen, 1992).

For young people

Alexandra Siy: *The Efe; People of the Ituri Rainforest* (Dillon Press/ Maxwell Macmillan, 1993).

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