Definition: Bambuti from Britannica Concise Encyclopedia

A number of Pygmy peoples of the Ituri Forest of eastern Congo (Kinshasa). Bambuti is a collective name for four populations of Ituri Pygmies—the Sua (Asua), Aka, Efe, and Mbuti—each of which has formed a loose economic and cultural interdependency with an agricultural group. They average under 4 ft 6 in. (137 cm) in height. Probably the earliest inhabitants of the region, they are nomadic hunters and gatherers living in small groups of from 10 to 100. They have no chiefs or formal councils of elders and believe in a benevolent forest deity. Their music, complex in rhythm and harmony, is often accompanied by dance or mime. Today they number in the tens of thousands.

Event: Bambuti

Keywords: Bambuti

Summary Article: I.IV.7 The Mbuti of northern Congo

From The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Hunters and Gatherers

Introduction

The Mbuti are Bantu-speaking hunter-gatherers living in the southern part of the Ituri Forest of the northeast part of the Democratic Republic of Congo (former Zaire). They and their Sudanic-speaking neighbors, the Efe and Aka to the north, are probably the best-known hunter-gatherers in central Africa. Ancient Egyptian dynasties called them the “dancers of God,” and the “brave elephant hunters.” Like other “Pygmy” groups in central Africa, they have kept close contact with Bantu-speakers (Bira and Ndaka cultivators) for at least several centuries. Perhaps, even, they did not live in the forest prior to the introduction of agriculture to the region. The long history of contact with agricultural societies has not, however, resulted in the loss of hunting-gathering life-ways; these have been reinforced by the Mbuti’s role in the wider society as forest specialists. In the 1970s when the first research was carried out, the Mbuti in Teturi area spent several months a year in nomadic forest camps, in spite of the increasing prevalence of the monetary economy and other waves of development.

History

In 2600 BC, the Egyptians wrote about a tiny people living in the great forest in the upper Nile, a fact suggesting Mbuti ancestors probably inhabited the forest near the present Congo (Zaire)–Sudan border. The German explorer Georg Schweinfurth “discovered” the Pygmy (calling themselves Aka) in northern Ituri during the nineteenth century. Their “discoverer” also found they had a well-entrenched interdependent relationship with neighboring Mangbetu cultivators. In 1887, Stanley met the Mbuti on the Ituri River, on his way to “rescue” Emin Pasha, who was then isolated in southern Sudan by Mahdists. The area had been occupied by Arab slavers, ivory hunters, and their local dependants, the Maniema. The Mbuti soon became famous as elephant hunters: their first step into the world economy. In the Congo Free State, and during Belgian colonialism, the villagers were forced to collect wild rubber, or to labor in mines and on road construction. The Mbuti helped villagers to meet the rubber quota, hunt for ivories, and provide the forced laborers with forest meat.

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Population
At present, about 15,000 Mbuti (excluding Efe) in Mambasa and Beni Districts, and about 850 (1985) in Teturi; about 600 in 1975.

Location
Ituri Forest, northeast Congo (former Zaire); Teturi region: 1500 km².

During the Simba (meaning “lion”) Rebellion which swept across the area in 1964–5, both government and rebels recruited the Mbuti as forest guides. Some died during operations. Their association with the rebels is remembered by the clan name Bamasimba (Simba people) in the southern part of the forest.

Ecological setting
The Ituri Forest is habitat to fourteen primate and fourteen ungulate species, including the prevalent giraffe-like ungulates called okapis. The elephants and buffaloes are classified as subspecies of a forest type, while some savannah species like spotted hyenas and Anubis baboons are also found in the forest. The Mbuti select for use from the forest's diverse species, 230 animal species and more than one hundred plants.

The primary forest is dominated by high trees of the Caesalpiniaceae family, and contains scattered patches of secondary growth. There are many light-demanding food trees or escaped crops like oil palms in the secondary forest regenerated from abandoned fields and settlements. These human-derived secondary forest resources are an important ecological component of Mbuti subsistence (Ichikawa 1996). The climate is divided into a rainy season from April to November and a dry season from December to March. The rain falls two out of three days in the rainy season and one out of three in the dry season. The Mbuti mainly stay near villages in the rainy season, working as field hands for the villagers, and hunting and gathering in the nearby forest, sometimes moving to forest camps for intensive net hunting (Harako 1976).

Economy
The most important hunting method is collective net hunting. Hunting nets are made from the inner bark of forest vines called kusa (Manniophyton fulvum), and owned by each family. Nets are 1 m high and 30–50 m long. About ten of them are joined together in a large semicircle, toward which the prey is beaten. Men handle the nets and kill the animals entangled in them, whereas women beat the bush and transport the animals to the camp. The major targets are small to medium-sized mammals, forest duikers in particular, which account for 90 percent of the total catch (Tanno 1976). Unlike other hunting methods, net hunting yields a fairly stable catch, often used for commercial meat trading. Traditional hunting with bows is now found mainly in secondary forest lands where arboreal monkeys are shot with poisoned arrows. The Mbuti spear has a large head, 8–10 cm wide and between 35 and 45 cm long. The spear is used for large mammals such as bushpigs, buffaloes, and elephants.

While hunting is the major subsistence activity, Mbuti obtain more than 60 percent of their food in the form of cassava, plantain, and other agricultural crops from their villager neighbors. These items are exchanged for meat and agricultural labor, or for items foraged in the villagers’ abandoned fields. These transactions occur through gift-exchange in the traditional kpara patron–client relationship. Direct
exchanges of meat or daily-hired labor (“par jour”) for agricultural food are also common. Wild vegetables occupy only a minor portion of the Mbuti diet, though some, like *Landolphia* and *Canarium* fruits and *Irvingia* nuts, are highly prized. Mbutis also collect more than thirty species of non-vertebrates and their products. Of these, honey is by far the most important, providing more than 80 percent of calorific intake in the peak honey season.

**Settlement, mobility, and land tenure**

The Mbuti settlements consist of a semi-sedentary base camp near the *kpara* (patron) village, nomadic hunting camps in the forest, and small camps for collecting honey. The camps are mostly composed of kin-related members of the same band, although two or more bands occasionally form a large joint camp, especially for net hunts. The base camp is located behind the *kpara* villages, 0.5–2 km into the forest, along a hunting path to the interior forest. From five to seven camps are situated along the path at intervals of 3–7 km. During forest hunts, Mbutis move from one camp to another for one or two months, depending on the catch. The hunting path and its surrounding area comprise their hunting territory. While the boundary of a territory is not always clear, people distinguish their territories by saying “we use our own path” (Ichikawa 1978). All band members have free access to the resources in this territory. There is no private ownership of land. Individuals have, however, rights over the natural beehives or termite mounds which they have located and marked.

**Domestic organization**

The Mbuti hunting camp is composed of ten to twenty-five semi-spherical, leaf-thatched huts arranged in a circle around the central plaza. Each hut shelters a husband, wife, and offspring. Polygamous families build either more than one hut or a hump-shaped hut of two rooms. Hut residents compose a consumption unit, cooking with its own fire in front of the hut. Men communally eat the meal prepared by their wives at the gathering place (*tele*) in the central plaza, while women and children eat separately at their own family hearth.

Mbuti marriage involves the payment of bridewealth, or the exchange of sisters or other close female relatives. Bridewealth was formerly paid in iron implements or bark cloths; today, in cash. With the Congo/Zairian national economy’s soaring inflation, exchange marriages are often preferred to bridewealth; today they account for nearly half of the marriages in some bands. A legitimately married couple usually lives virilocally, which results in the band composition of patrilineally related males and their wives and children. Families are enmeshed in clans with specific clan names and totemic animals avoided by members. Actual band composition is, however, more composite, with uxorilocal residence, and band fission and fusion (Ichikawa 1978). The kinship terminology is of the Iroquois type, distinguishing cross-cousins from parallel-cousins, though actual terms of address are flexible, often employing namesake relationships, frequent use of fictive kin terms, and an indifference to genealogical relationships beyond the first ascending generation.

**Political organization**

Each band has a spokesperson, the *kapita*, an institution apparently introduced from outside. Until recently, the kapita’s role was confined to liaison work with horticultural villagers and regional administrators. Administrative demands, like tax-collection, census taking, and corvée labor services are made through the kapita; if such demands are not met, the kapita is called into the local administrative office. Ironically, kapita authority is acknowledged by other band members, not through privilege, but through recognition of his sufferings on behalf of the community. Internal social relations are regulated
mainly through face-to-face interaction, especially in sharing related to labor, food, material culture, bridewealth, and other forms of mutual aid. Decisions concerning the entire band, such as camp movement or selection of hunting grounds, are made in the course of men's gatherings in the *tele*. Here, opinions of the elderly and the experienced are respected. Aged women may sometimes join these discussions; younger women listen quietly from their family hearths. When intolerable conflicts arise, one of the disputants simply moves to another camp to “cool off the head.” Injury or other serious cases are submitted to the court in the local village, or to *la gendarmerie* in cases of serious injury or murder.

**Religion and spirituality**

While forest animals are important sources of food, some of them may cause dreadful diseases and other misfortunes if eaten carelessly. Pregnant women and newborn babies are particularly vulnerable to such dangerous animals, called, as a category, *kuweri*. Eighty percent of the sixty edible mammals are avoided for this reason at least for a part of the life-cycle.

The Mbuti conceptualize the forest as a womb, the most comfortable place to stay before birth; it is, as well, the territory where their ancestors roam. The forest is thus ambivalent: the source of good and evil; the place Mbutis come from before birth, and return to after death (Ichikawa 1996). The forest as such is controlled by *Apakumandura* (literally, “Father of Forest”). In case of prolonged failure in hunting, they perform a singing and dancing ritual, *surya*, for the forest father, saying that “he has closed the forest.”

Dancing and singing, for which the Mbuti have been famed since the ancient era, are performed not only for amusement, but also as an essential part of the *rites de passage* like circumcision, girls’ puberty, marriages, and funerals. They also communicate with dead ancestors, who cause the living to dance and sing, after people have encountered the ancestors in dreams. Different kinds of songs are associated with different types of subsistence activities, for example songs for net hunting, for elephant hunting and for honey collecting.

**Current situation**

The commercial meat trade, which began in the 1950s and intensified in the 1970s, has stimulated market-oriented hunting among the Mbuti (Hart 1978). Before this development, Mbutis had links to the external economy only indirectly through their villager patrons. In the meat trade, by contrast, traders from outside the forest visit Mbuti camps and directly transact with the hunters, thus avoiding the traditional *kpara* relationship. Moreover, the newly immigrating Nandes from the eastern hill country introduced new employment (“par jour”), paying the Mbuti in kind on each workday. The *kpara* relationship has declined as its economic basis of meat and labor has lost its former importance (Ichikawa 1991).

Since the early 1980s when gold dust mining was opened, immigration into the region has accelerated. The villager population in Teturi more than doubled between 1975 and 1985. The Mbuti population also increased by 40 percent during the same period. These population increases have led to deforestation and degradation of the resource base, particularly along the roads connecting the major villages in the area. Under such conditions, some Mbuti have abandoned their former hunting-gathering life, working as wage laborers on plantations, or as forest guides and porters for gold prospectors. Others have themselves begun to prospect for gold dust.

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As the Mbuti become increasingly involved in the market economy, they become subject to
government taxation; formerly, they were exempted as the *citoyen premier* of the Zairian nation-state.
Most Mbuti men in the Teturi area now pay half the tax paid by villagers, and hold their own national
identity cards. In addition to tax collectors, there are soldiers and civil servants demanding meat and
labor from Mbutis. A major reason for the failure of the sedentarization plan attempted in the 1970s
was the flight of Mbutis from officials and government agents.

**Lack of organization for resistance**
The Mbuti are gradually becoming incorporated into the Zaire/Congo state through taxation, national
identity cards, elections, and participation in other national events. They feel such involvement in the
state system is a heavy burden. There is as yet little way opened for them to express their ethnic
identity, or represent themselves politically in the state system. On the national identity cards, they are
classified as part of their villager patrons’ grouping, and are considered followers of the chief elected
by the settled villagers. Among their Efe neighbors, there is the so-called *Président des Pygmées*, who
is said to have been nominated by ex-President Mobutu, and who periodically has attended meetings at
the administration center in Mambasa or Bunia, though his authority is not fully acknowledged by the
Pygmies themselves. The Mbuti have never had such formal representation in one person. The only
form of protest used by Mbutis is to escape into the interior forest, as they did when the government
tried to induce them to settle along the major roads.

**Reading list**
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**Music**
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  for Smithsonian Folkways (FE 4457), recorded by C. Turnbull and F. S. Chapman in 1957.

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