

Democratic Republic of the Congo - Batwa and Bambuti

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Profile

The main 'Pygmy' groupings in Democratic Republic of the Congo are the Batwa (or BaTua), numbering up to 100,000 in the Lake Tumba region of north-west DRC, as well as a few thousand in Kivu near the Uganda and Rwanda borders, and the Bambuti of the Ituri forest in north-east DRC, numbering about 35,000 (est Refugees International). The term Batwa is used to cover a number of different cultural groups, while many Batwa in various parts of the DRC call themselves Bambuti. Many Bambuti and Batwa depend in part on forest hunting and gathering, and both groups have symbiotic if often subservient relationships with neighbouring agriculturalists; but whilst many Ituri-based Bambuti retain traditional semi-nomadic residence patterns, most Batwa are sedentarized and very many are cultivators.

Historical context

Bambuti provide a good illustration of the pressures on Pygmy populations, even among a group generally considered closest to traditional ways of living. Despite being viewed by cultivators as inferior and even not fully human, the Bambuti, like most Pygmy people, benefited from reciprocal relationships whereby game, skins and other forest products were exchanged for food, while allowing autonomous social and cultural traditions to be maintained. For most Bambuti such long-standing relationships substantially survived the depredations of the slaving and colonial eras. In the civil conflicts of the 1960s, however, many outsiders sought refuge in the forest, and stayed on as traders and gold prospectors. Increasingly the Bambuti were drawn into a monetarized economy, selling meat for cash and engaging in menial wage-labour, invariably for a fraction of normal rates. Large areas of the forest were reserved as national parks, from which hunting was banned. Women increasingly married outsiders, further disrupting the basis of Bambuti society. Traditional relationships have increasingly degenerated into those of exploitation and servitude, sometimes bordering on outright slavery, accompanied by social disintegration and loss of morale, and often by social

problems such as alcoholism and prostitution.

Official government policy in Mobutu's Zaire was that Pygmies should be 'emancipated' and considered as being no different from other citizens – indeed the use of the term 'Pygmy' was officially banned. To the extent that Mobutu implemented any social policies, especially in the east, in practice this meant promoting sedentarization and agriculture – a policy also pursued to some degree in colonial times and reflected in many missionary programmes.

Prospects for DRC's Pygmies, particularly for those still maintaining in whole or in part a forest-dwelling existence, also relate to developments at a national level. The country's forests represent a huge economic resource, whose survival has partly been a consequence of the political instability and economic chaos which has inhibited infrastructural development and the viability of commercial logging. If DRC gains stability, the forest, as elsewhere in the region, would be under greater threat, and the social and cultural disintegration of Pygmy society, already far advanced, would be likely to accelerate.

But while conflict and instability have perhaps helped deter large-scale deforestation, the Batwa and Bambuti peoples have suffered immensely from war. As MRG found in 2002, Batwa or Bambuti peoples living deep in the forests of eastern DRC had become targets of various militias, including that of Jean-Pierre Bemba and his Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC). Between October 2002 and January 2003, before they joined the power-sharing interim government in June 2004, rebel groups MLC and RCD-N jointly carried out a premeditated, systematic campaign of attack against the civilian population of Ituri, which they named 'Effacer le tableau' ('Erasing the Board'). The objective of the campaign was to gain control of the territory, including the strategic surrounding forests, and to plunder its resources, using the terror created by grave human rights abuses as a weapon of war. Encompassing the civilian population in general, the fact that the campaign specifically targeted the Batwa for mass killing and the severe deprivation of other fundamental rights, by reason of their supposed supernatural powers and knowledge of the forest, indicates the commission of the crimes against humanity of persecution and extermination.

Current issues

Among minority populations suffering particularly from the continuing conflict in the east are the Congolese Batwa/Bambuti. In South Kivu, continuing attacks by Rwandan rebel forces in the countryside outside Bukavu have a grave effect on the Batwa/Bambuti as on other communities. Pillage, torture and killings are common, and there is a particularly high incidence of rape and extreme sexual violence. Batwa women have been singled out for rape due to beliefs that sleeping with them confers special powers to the rapist. Because rape was so common during the war, Batwa and Bambuti rates of HIV infection have risen throughout the conflict, from very little or no infection before the war to almost matching the national infection rate. In North Kivu, some Batwa / Bambuti communities have been caught in the large waves of displacement caused by the ongoing fighting between forces loyal to Nkunda, Congolese Mai-Mai, and the Congolese armed forces. Further north in Ituri, the situation in areas of Bambuti population was calmer during the course of 2006 – 7, although some parts of the

district are threatened by the presence of hardcore FRPI fighters who have refused to join the demobilization programme. Throughout the region, the chronic poverty and marginalization experienced by Batwa / Bambuti communities is exacerbated by the security situation. In June 2006, the British health journal *The Lancet* reported on the lack of Batwa and Bambuti access to healthcare: 'Even where healthcare facilities exist, many people do not use them because they cannot pay for consultations and medicines, do not have the documents and identity cards needed to travel or obtain hospital treatment, or are subjected to humiliating and discriminatory treatment.'

Control over forest resources continued to be of critical importance to the Batwa/Bambuti. In late 2007, a leaked report from a World Bank Inspection Panel said that the bank had backed an environmentally-damaging logging project, without consulting with the Batwa, or considering the impact on their communities. Recently, a coalition of organisations based around forest peoples' groups has also been lobbying at the UN against what they regard as a deficient government response to the plight of the forest peoples. Following the government's presentation in 2006 of its State Party report to the UN's Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, this grouping replied in January 2007, noting that forest peoples had been completely ignored in Kinshasa's submission. In its concluding observations issued in August 2007, CERD recommended that DRC take 'urgent and adequate measures' to protect the rights of the Batwa to land'. It also urged that there be a moratorium on forest lands, register the ancestral lands of the Batwa, and make provision for the forest rights of indigenous peoples in domestic legislation.