

From The Forest People

Written in 1965 by Colin Turnbull

In the Northeast Corner of the Belgian Congo (now Democratic Republic of Congo), almost exactly in the middle of the map of Africa, lies the Ituri Forest, a vast expanse of dense, damp, and inhospitable-looking darkness...

The world of the forest is a closed, possessive world, hostile to all those who do not understand it. At first sight you might think it hostile to all human beings, because in every village you find the same suspicion and fear of the forest, that impenetrable wall. The villagers are friendly and hospitable to strangers, offering them the best of whatever food and drink they have, and always clearing out a house where the traveler can rest in comfort and safety. But these villages are set among plantations in great clearings cut from the heart of the forest around them. It is from the plantations that food comes, not from the forest, and for the villagers life is a constant battle to prevent their plantations from being overgrown.

They speak of the world beyond the plantations as being a fearful place, full of malevolent spirits and not fit to be lived in except by animals and the Mbuti. The villagers, some Bantu and some Sudanic, keep to their plantations and seldom go into the forest unless it is absolutely necessary. For them it is a place of evil. They are outsiders.

But the Mbuti are the real people of the forest. Whereas the other tribes are relatively recent arrivals, the Mbuti have been in the forest for thousands of years. It is their world, and in return for their affection and trust, it supplies them with all their needs. They do not have to cut the forest down to build plantations, for they know how to hunt the game of the region and gather the wild fruits that grow in abundance there, though hidden to outsiders. They know how to distinguish the innocent-looking itaba vine from the many others that closely resemble it, and they know how to follow it until it leads them to a cache of nutritious, sweet-tasting roots. They know the tiny sounds that tell where the bees have hidden their honey; they recognize the kind of weather that brings a multitude of different

kinds of mushrooms springing to the surface; and they know what kinds of wood and leaves often disguise this food. The exact moment when termites swarm, at which they must be caught to provide an important delicacy, is a mystery to any but the people of the forest. They know the secret language that is denied all outsiders and without which life in the forest is an impossibility.

The Mbuti roam the forest at will, in small isolated bands or hunting groups. They have no fear, because for them there is no danger. For them there is little hardship, so they have no need for belief in spirits. For them it is a good world. The fact that they average less than four and a half feet in height is of no concern to them; their taller neighbors, who jeer at them for being so puny, are as clumsy as elephants—another reason why they must always remain outsiders in a world where your life may depend on your ability to run swiftly and silently. And if the Mbuti are small, they are powerful and tough.

Mbuti Facts

The Mbuti [*mm-BOO-tee*] live in small groups of several families. They dwell in the Ituri (*ih-TUR-ee*) Forest, a rainforest in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Africa.

- When food becomes scarce, the group moves to another area within the forest.
- Women gather most of the group's food (fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, roots, nuts, and so on). Girls often help with food gathering.
- Men hunt small antelopes, monkeys, and other animals using bows and arrows. Boys often help with the hunt. Men and boys also gather honey, a favorite food.
- After a successful hunt, the Mbuti hold a feast. After the feast, they often celebrate by singing and dancing.
- Women build the group's dome-shaped huts out of saplings and leaves.