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Mbuti Adaptability as a Strategy for Cultural Preservation

In his anthropological case study The Mbuti Pygmies: Change and Adaption, Colin M. Turnbull described the Mbuti reaction to the immigration of other cultures as non-violent. Turnbull asserted that the Mbuti desired a peaceful coexistence and the ability to maintain "the integrity of their forest way of life." However, the Mbuti's dealings with the 'villagers,' who immigrated to the Ituri area some 500 years ago, and with the new Congolese government and rebels demonstrate that, while they are not warriors, they will not submit willingly to those who wish to control, assimilate or eradicate them. The Mbuti have employed non-violent strategies to attempt to resolve conflict and have displayed incredible adaptability. These strategies have helped them maintain their culture and lifestyle but may not be able to protect them from the radical changes of the 21st century.

According to Turnbull, the arrival of the farming 'villagers' half a millennia ago could have impacted the foraging Mbuti in a variety of ways. They might have fought, assimilated to the new culture, converted the immigrants to the Mbuti way of life or simply moved to avoid contact. Because the Mbuti desired to continue their society undisturbed in the forest so familiar to them, they employed a different, a non-violent strategy which required neither culture to change or relocate. The Mbuti gathered extra resources to trade to the villagers at the periphery of the forest. Of course, the Mbuti had everything they needed and traded with the villagers solely so that they would have no reason to enter the forest and threaten Mbuti territory. The Mbuti even entered the cities

to do work. While there, they would adapt to village customs. Turnbull noted that, once back in the forest, the Mbuti returned to their native ways, demonstrating that no real assimilation had taken place. The Mbuti adapted rather than changed. This strategy was a manipulation of the villagers. To the farmers, it appeared that the Mbuti were subservient: they spoke the new language, brought goods from the forest and worked in the towns. The farmers thought they were winning and the Mbuti wanted them to think they were winning. This kept them out of the forest without the need for war and bloodshed and at a minimal cost to the Mbuti people. Though unfamiliar with the newcomers, the Mbuti seemed to know exactly how to behave to make the best of the situation. (Turnbull 1983: 20-23)

Of course the Mbuti could not keep everyone out of the forest forever. Belgian colonizers took control of the area in the 1900s. According to Turnbull, modern economics demanded resources for profit and modern technology enabled faster extraction of those resources than ever before. What threatens the forest threatens the forest people, but the Mbuti continued their cunning adaptation for a time. According to Anup Shah, Congo became independent in 1960 and was governed by Prime Minister Lumumba. This was during the Cold War and the US opposed Lumumba because he was non-aligned in the conflict. A few years later, the US supported a coup led by dictator Mobutu Sese Soko with finances and training under the guise of 'stopping communism.' The Congolese civil war began 30 years later, in 1997, when Congolese President Laurent Kabila took control. This divided the country and even turned neighboring countries against each other as conflicts developed over basic resources, valuable mineral deposits and political agendas. The fighting that broke out in 1998 would become the

world's most lethal conflict since WWII. Although these events shocked the world, the powerful nations that might have made a difference were turning a profit thanks to the very resources being pumped out of the war torn nation. (Shah 2008: 1)

According to Bruce D. Bonta, Jean-Pierre Bemba, the leader of the rebel army Mouvement pour la Libération du Congo (MLC), created the motto “effacez le tableau,” or “erasing the board.” This meant not only terrorizing and looting, but eradication. Murder and rape became war tactics and were targeted at the Mbuti and other ethnic groups. This systematic dehumanization was intended to crush the Mbuti culture if not their entire race. The Minority Rights Group International compiled a report on crimes against humanity perpetrated against the Mbuti entitled 'Erasing the Board.' The report includes testimonies of Mbuti people who were victims or witnesses of psychological abuses, rape, torture, and murder. (MRGI 2004: 11-13)

This motto of human destruction may have inspired the accusations the Mbuti made in 2003 that Congolese militia frequently murdered, roasted and consumed Mbuti people. This was another cunning strategy of a people trying desperately to withstand a violent and changing world. Again, though the Mbuti knew relatively little of global politics, they seemed to know exactly what to say to get the media on their side. Atrocities and war crimes occur daily, but incidents of cannibalism are rare and incite reaction. Headlines such as "Chaos and Cannibals under Congo's Bloody Skies" (from the *Observer* of London) received front page attention around the world. Although one of the accusers later retracted his entire story, this was a smart strategy and one that moved many to become sympathetic to the plight of the Mbuti. (Bonta 2008: 1)

Although the Congo Civil War was theoretically ended by a peace agreement signed in 2002 and elections were held in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2006, the conflict is far from over. The government is still weak and unstable, allowing human rights abuses to continue in the North and the East (where the Mbuti live). In addition to continued violence, the Mbuti face deforestation and a ban on hunting large game. Their food supply and way of life is threatened. (Shah 2008: 1)

The Mbuti have displayed incredible adaptability and a cunning which allows them to maintain their way of life through manipulation instead of warfare. They are indeed a resilient and proud people. Whether they will survive on into the 21st century is a matter of debate, but I believe that, if it is at all possible, they will continue on as traditionally as they can manage.

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