

Prologue: Pygmies have changed

Michael Nest

In the film adaptation of C.S. Lewis' tale *Prince Caspian: The Return to Narnia*, the Crown Prince flees on horseback when his uncle tries to murder him and take over the throne. Prince Caspian is pursued by soldiers but they hesitate to follow him into the dark woods, held back by fear and superstitions of the 'Old Narnians' who once lived there: minotaurs, fauns, dancing trees, talking animals and dwarves. Prince Caspian, knocked unconscious in the forest when he falls off his horse, is given shelter by a dwarf and a badger. When he regains consciousness and sees his hosts he starts in fright: 'What are you?' he exclaims. 'I mean, you're Narnians. You're supposed to be extinct!'

When I told people I was working on a memoir of a Pygmy, they reacted as if I had just told them that Old Narnians still exist. There was amazement that a Pygmy lives in Sydney; wonder that Pygmies really do exist at all; intense curiosity about stature (so let's clarify this right now: Isaac is short); and sometimes mirth at how exotic the whole thing sounded. I'm embarrassed to say that initially I fed some of this. 'Guess what I did on the weekend?' I asked one friend. 'Had lunch with a Pygmy.' 'Should you be calling him that?' she shot back. Another friend told me she thought the word 'Pygmy' simply reflected an imperial prejudice towards short Africans, not realising there were whole populations – Isaac would say a whole race – who identify as such. Saying I was working on a memoir of a Pygmy was the most straightforward way to



explain the project, but that simple word ‘Pygmy’ provoked the Narnian response.

Legends and fairytales about short people who live in wild places – dwarves, hobbits, Pygmies – are deep within our subconscious and they make us doubt what is real. This is even more the case for Pygmies because they live in the rainforest of tropical Africa. I have flown over Central Africa and, from above, the forest is impenetrable: a thick green canopy that goes on for thousands of miles, blanketing everything in mystery. We know something of the jungle: it is where malaria and Ebola come from, where strange animals live and where Marlow from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* journeyed. We wonder what Pygmies could be doing there, out of sight.

Some stories about Pygmies are so outlandish we can hardly believe they are real. Indigenous people everywhere have been mistreated, but surely the single most demeaning thing ever done to an indigenous person was to a Pygmy called Ota Benga. In 1906, he was put with an orang-utan into the Monkey House at the Bronx Zoo in New York and made into an exhibit. The zoo director’s intention was to provoke New Yorkers into reflecting on Darwin’s theory of evolution and arguments about the Missing Link ... and to make the turnstiles spin. A century later the international media reported that armed militias waging war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (‘the Congo’ or simply ‘Congo’ as Isaac commonly refers to it) were hunting down Pygmies to eat them, in order to obtain the magical powers that reportedly allow Pygmies to survive in the forests. A former colleague of Isaac’s, also a Pygmy, went to the United Nations in New York to plead for cannibalism to be explicitly included as a crime against humanity, so perpetrators could



be fully prosecuted. Cannibalism was not at that stage designated as such, but who would have thought it needed to be?

The truth about Pygmy life in the forest, as Isaac recounts in this memoir, is somewhat more prosaic than all the myths, stories and legends. In the forest Isaac led a contented childhood that was relentlessly focused on gathering food. But few Pygmies live exclusively in the forest. Most move in and out of the jungle depending on the season, bartering meat, honey or their labour in return for food. Most are also no longer the hunter-gatherers untouched by modernity that we might wish.

The idea that Pygmies are a pre-modern people in a 'lost world' has excited travellers and scholars ever since colonisation by Europeans in the late nineteenth century made the forests of equatorial Africa accessible. Colonisation happened at the same time that Darwin's theory of evolution was sweeping popular culture, and much of the original scholarly interest in Pygmies was focused on obtaining evidence about their place in the presumed hierarchy of human races. Academia has subsequently evolved, but Pygmies' short stature and their hunter-gatherer ways remain perennially favourite subjects, and anthropologists, human biologists, geneticists and linguists have written libraries about these topics.

In all our meetings the subject that irritated Isaac the most was the idea that Pygmies live in a forest idyll or that they are incapable of adapting to life outside the jungle. 'All these academics,' he would rail, 'they write as though Pygmies can only live in the forest.' Isaac often listed the Pygmies he knew with jobs and education. Indeed, an increasing number of Pygmies live in the towns and cities of Central Africa. Others in the east of the



Democratic Republic of the Congo, driven out of the countryside by war, live almost destitute on the edges of those towns and cities. And some Pygmies move to Australia.

I first met Isaac in 2009, six years after he came to Sydney. I was doing research for a book on the politics around an obscure mineral called tantalite, or 'coltan' as it is known in Congo. A Congolese geologist told me about a friend of his, a former coltan trader from Eastern Congo now living in Sydney. 'He's a Pygmy too,' the geologist added. I had met Pygmies before when I was backpacking through Africa and I had done research in Congo, so I knew something about them. But like those friends and acquaintances who gave the 'Old Narnian' response, I wondered how on earth a Pygmy had washed up on the shores of Sydney.

I telephoned Isaac and told him about my coltan book project, and he invited me around for lunch. We sat in his large living room which, African style, had several lounge settees placed around the walls to accommodate many guests, but few other decorations. His wife, Josephine, fried pork chops and greens in the kitchen, well within earshot but keeping silent. Isaac's courteous children – he has ten – came up to me in turn, greeting me and telling me their name and number: 'Hello, I'm Abishay. Number six.' 'Boaz. I'm number nine.' I was transported back to the family homes and hospitality of Congo.

I found in Isaac someone with whom I could talk about Congolese politics, and felt grateful. I realise now that Isaac was also grateful to have found someone with whom he could talk about books and ideas. Isaac had had some problems in the workplace and he welcomed the opportunity to discuss these with an Australian who understood local work culture as well. I was



interested in his perspective, as a Pygmy, on life, but the more we talked the more I realised how idiosyncratic Isaac is. I knew no other Pygmies with whom I could compare him, but I knew the stereotypes and I had met many Congolese. By Isaac's own account he is different. He is his own man, someone who questions things and insists on coming to his own conclusions, sometimes coming a cropper in the process when he has queried powerful people. As I came to discover, he is also unlike other Pygmies in that he has resisted hiding his racial and ethnic identity, although he has at times. As we relaxed in each other's company Isaac told me more and more about his life and I became convinced it was a story worth telling to a larger audience.

In early 2012, Isaac emailed me some pages of a memoir he had started drafting, wanting feedback. He had also started to tell me more about his life in Congo. Isaac had a compelling personal story, with tales of ruthless social competition, his mother engaging witchdoctors to kill her daughter-in-law (Isaac's wife), and of working as a human rights activist under a repressive regime. However, in its current form I thought his manuscript was unlikely to find a publisher. I offered to co-write a full memoir with Isaac with a view to publication, and he agreed.

Our project faced several obstacles. Isaac's family, not wanting to be 'outed' as Pygmies, has not supported it. Like Pygmies back in Africa who try to disguise their identity and assimilate in order to avoid discrimination, his family has tried to do the same in Australia. It is hard enough being black Africans in an Australia still getting used to African migrants, let alone being Pygmies. His wife cautioned, 'We should try to live a simple life. When you write a book you don't see anything wrong with it, but in one or two years



the consequences may start to come.’ She gently reminded Isaac that it was his decision to become an activist and give public talks that had caused the family to flee to Kenya and become refugees, bringing an end to their comfortable life in Congo. His children told him, ‘If you come to Australia you should be Australian. We should forget about all these things from Africa.’

Isaac has also been fearful that publishing his story would bring humiliation and contempt upon his family; that people – readers of this memoir, other Africans, Australians – would dismiss his stories of struggle. I was taken aback that he genuinely thought he might be disparaged for telling his story. I suggested we give a presentation about the project at an African studies conference, feeling sure that everyone there would be supportive and interested. The conference’s theme was to ‘explore ways in which Africans on the continent and abroad continue to change, challenge and re-shape our knowledge of African people, spaces and places’. Isaac loved it. ‘This is really fantastic,’ he emailed. ‘When I looked at the program, I was so happy to see that the theme of the conference matches exactly with our fight against false ideology – that Pygmies are still the same and have never changed towards modern civilisation. I hope my memoir will make Pygmies be proud of their identity and make other people understand Pygmies are also world citizens with the same capabilities as anyone.’ A friend took a photo of us presenting at the conference and it captures Isaac in full flight. Dressed in a crisp blue-and-white striped shirt he is speaking passionately, kind brown eyes and high forehead crinkled in animation above gesticulating hands, a tuft of grey in his black hair revealing that his perspective is one of a mature man, a father, who has seen a lot of life.



His family had cautioned him about going to the conference. ‘Just remember,’ Josephine said, ‘that saying publicly at a conference that we are oppressed is why we are in Australia today. You should be careful talking about rights to this and that person. That is very dangerous.’ She was referring to Isaac attending conferences in Africa when he had been an activist and talking about the dire situation of Pygmies. ‘We already had to run from Congo. If the Australian government doesn’t like what you say, where can we run to next? There is nowhere left.’ Again I was taken aback, this time by the idea that there might be retribution by the Australian government, even though the whole family are now Australian citizens. These comments told me something about the deep fear within Congolese who have learnt never to trust government authorities, who have betrayed and abused them for 130 years. Even after obtaining Australian citizenship, Isaac and his wife do not fully believe they have rights that allow them to speak their mind and which might protect them.

Isaac can also fall into melancholy and this occasionally, if temporarily, tempered his enthusiasm for the project. Even when he emailed those first draft pages to me, he wrote: ‘I started writing my memoir. You can have a look at the introduction attached to this email. I am expressively very exhausted and I have no strength, otherwise I could have written half of this book already despite my poor English. I have become sleepless, thinking and asking myself a lot of questions in regard to what I experienced in the past and now.’

Ultimately Isaac’s desire to write a memoir and tackle the past outweighed his doubts. ‘I told Josephine I want our kids and our grandkids to know me. To know why we migrated from Africa to Australia. If it is not written down, everything will be forgotten.’

Another motivation was to counter the stereotypes and myths about Pygmies. ‘Pygmies have changed,’ Isaac told me. ‘They are not the same as they used to be. If you go to Google Images and search for “Pygmies” you will get pictures of Pygmies in the forest only, not Pygmies who are educated, who are modern. Just those who are half-naked and live a traditional life.’

Recording Isaac’s story was straightforward. We met once or twice a week over coffee at a café in a suburb halfway between our homes, or occasionally at the local pub. The Korean café owners indulged us, kindly letting us sit there for hours. Each time we met I was transported to other times and places by Isaac’s stories; so engrossed, I barely noticed the ebb and flow of other customers around our table. Once Isaac opened up on a theme, I just had to keep pace taking handwritten notes – copying his words down verbatim – and asking for the occasional clarification. Isaac is a good storyteller, and a patient one, and he became accustomed to talking at the speed at which I could write. When I got home, I would sit down at the computer and type up my notes from that day.

In getting Isaac to talk about his life I made him recall some terrible events, and I still feel badly about this. But there were also some beautiful moments when my questions led Isaac to recall the many people who’d helped or inspired him. One of them was an Aboriginal woman, Letty Scott, who passed away in 2009. Because Letty was Aboriginal, and because we wanted to include some words she had told Isaac about her personal experiences with white people, I thought we should get permission from a family member to use her name and repeat these words. I did an Internet search to try to track down contact details for her family, and found a

Facebook page with a photo of a Letty Scott who died in 2009. I felt this must be Isaac's friend, and emailed him the link. Isaac sent me the following message in reply: 'This is unbelievable, I had no idea that Letty's picture could be found on Facebook. Letty's picture makes us all cry in my family, tears are still falling from my eyes. I heard her voice last when she rang me in 2007. I remember how she used to hold my hand, touching me and telling me emotional, encouraging words.'

Jan Vansina, an eminent scholar of Central African societies, lamented that:

There are no Pygmy authors and no authors who come from the villages with which the hunter-gatherers are linked. The main reason that Pygmies have attracted such attention has been, first, their 'exotic' appeal, and second, the assumption that somehow they represent the roots of humanity. They are studied for their presumed potential to elucidate life at the dawn of humanity, not for their own sake.

So here is a book by a Pygmy author, a memoir about himself and his people, in his own words, for his own sake. Although as Isaac says, 'Of course, this is my personal story. It is not the story of all Pygmies or even all the Pygmies from Eastern Congo.' The book is a collaboration in that Isaac told me his story and I recorded it, but the text is 99 per cent in Isaac's original words – unchanged from the stories he told me in the café. My role was to shift sentences around, order topics to shape the narrative and elicit background information about events to provide context for

what was happening to Isaac. We have changed several names to protect identities.

Compared to fellow Australians, Isaac's life has been strange, for sure. But what has most shaped his life is not exotic at all. It is those utterly contemporary and universal themes of love, ambition, pride and prejudice.