

STILL A PYGMY

The story of one man's fight to save his identity from extinction and the journey that took him from the forests of Congo to the suburbs of Sydney

Still a Pygmy is a story of love, pride and prejudice that traces the journey of BaTembo Pygmy Isaac Bacirongo from the forests of Central Africa, through the brutality of dictatorship and war, to arrival and settlement in Australia's melting pot. Isaac's inimitable style and voice draw readers into the



heart of this memoir, his relationship with his wife, who survived his mother's attempts to kill her to help Isaac through experiences of appalling violence. It is full of warmth, wit and wise insights about life.

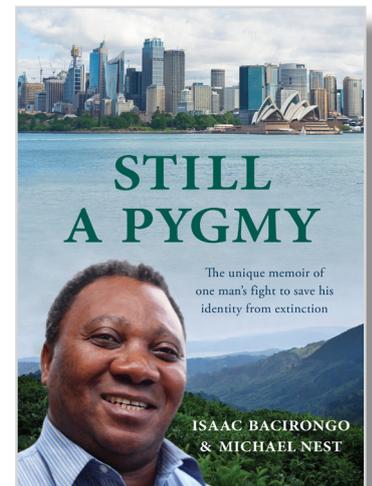
Isaac Bacirongo grew up as a Pygmy hunter-gatherer in the Congo. However, when his Papa left the forest to find work, Isaac went to missionary school, where he fell in love with scientific reason and rejected his mission teachings. He courted and wed Josephine, a 'town girl', whom his mother hated. Complaining that her new daughter-in-law would not be able to catch crabs or collect firewood, she engaged a witchdoctor in an attempt to kill her. Isaac and Josephine moved to the city, and he became a prosperous businessman.

Isaac became a community leader involved in the fight for Pygmy rights, but he was imprisoned for his activism by the brutal regime that controls Eastern

Congo. He bribed his way out of jail and fled to Kenya with his wife and 10 children in 2000. There he becomes an interpreter on a corruption investigation into the UNHCR. Granted a humanitarian visa, the family resettled as refugees in Sydney, but life started to unravel under the pressure of domestic violence, his children's assimilation and an Australian workplace that tested Isaac's African values.

Although this memoir is Isaac's personal story, unique in its perspective on life as a Pygmy, it is also a universal story about the tragedies and challenges faced by many refugees and migrants, and their indomitable spirit they display in rising above challenges and confronting change to touch and transform the new communities they join.

***Still a Pygmy* by Isaac Bacirongo and Michael Nest (Finch Publishing) will be available on 1 March 2015 in paperback (\$24.99 and ebook (\$9.99).**



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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Isaac Bacirongo (left) and Micheal Nest

Isaac Bacirongo is a BaTembo Pygmy. He helped establish Congo's first Pygmy Rights organization before migrating to Australia in 2003. In 2014, Isaac was one of nine members of The Living Library program (Manning Valley Neighbourhood Services/Greater Taree City Libraries) in which members could borrow real people to tell their stories instead of books for a half-hour conversation. Isaac delayed writing *Still a Pygmy* for years because of his concern about the possible consequences for his family if it was published, but decided it was a story that had to be told, not for the sake of his own family but for the sake of his people. He lives in Canleyvale, Sydney, with his wife, surrounded by their children and grandchildren.

Michael Nest is a freelance researcher with a PhD in African politics. He is the author of *Coltan* (Polity Press, 2011) about activist initiatives against conflict minerals from Congo, and *The Dem. Rep. of Congo: Economic Dimensions of War and Peace* (Lynne Rienner, 2006), which won a 'Best Title, 2006' award from the American Library Association. Michael lives in Surry Hills, Sydney.

From 'Town girls can't catch crabs', *Still a Pygmy* by Isaac Bacirongo & Michael Nest

I knew I could not return to teach at the school and that I had to leave the forest. One morning I took a stick and set off to walk to Bunyakiri. It took me all day but I got there at sunset. I went to see Mr Katipula, the teacher who had given me the miracle hen, and told him everything that had happened. Mr Katipula had two houses. Normally he rented the second one but it happened to be empty and he invited me to stay there. I went to the Baptist dispensary and got treatment for my wound. It took another six months before I could walk without a stick.

It was difficult to find another teaching job, or any job. I visited the principal of one school, someone I knew from when I was a student, to ask for a job. He did not have a job for me, and told me Bantu students would not want to be taught by a Pygmy and parents would complain. The principal's comments reminded me of a song the Bantu around Bunyakiri used to sing. In English it goes something like this:

Even if you wear nice clothes like Bantu, you won't become one, you'll stay a Pygmy.

Even if you go to school and get a diploma, the diploma won't make you Bantu...

In the end I started a small business out of Mr Katipula's house. On market day, Sunday, people from surrounding villages came in to Bunyakiri to sell banana wine. Sometimes they could not sell it all and did not want to carry it back home. They asked me to store and sell it for them in return for a share of the profit. During the week I could sell the wine at an expensive price, higher than on market day because on Sundays there was lots of wine available. I was able to pay the owners the low price of market days and keep the remainder of the money. I made about \$10 per week... Eventually I saved enough money to set up a stall on the street in the town centre where there were lots of customers.

It was while I was running this stall that I first started to notice the Josephine who became my wife. I already knew about Josephine through her grandmother, who was a Pygmy from the Mafuo Chiefdom, like Mama's mother. Both Josephine and her mother were Pygmoid. Every day on their way to their plot outside town where they grew vegetables, Josephine and her mother would walk past me, and I would look at her. I remember flirting with her like it was yesterday!...

When I first met Josephine I did not have enough money to marry, but Mama and Papa were pressuring me and I had been thinking about things. I decided it was better to marry someone who could adapt to where I lived, and Josephine was from Bunyakiri. However, I faced the same problems as with the other Josephine – Professor Job's sister-in-law. First, her father was a Bantu – although I knew her grandma was a Pygmy – and Bantus have superiority over us. Second, her family was well off, at least compared to mine and others in Bunyakiri. Her father was a watchman for a mining company so they had a steady income and a

comfortable life. I could tell her family was wealthy because her father had two houses and both had iron sheeting on the roof, and they had a battery-powered record player they used to listen to music and to dance. Third, Josephine did not know the forest at all, so another challenge was simply how to take her to meet my parents in the village where they were living. The biggest challenge, though, was that I decided I would have to find a way to live in a town because it would be hard for Josephine to live in the forest... So I asked Josephine to marry me.

I told her, 'I am happy when I look at you. You attract me. I want to marry you, and I am not joking. I love you and if you accept to marry me that would be so good.'

'I can't get married!' Josephine replied. 'I'm only seventeen! I need to be at least twenty.' ...

This was in December 1980. After that conversation I kept asking her if she had an answer for me. In January I asked again, and she told me, 'No, I'm not ready. I'll give you an answer later.'

Josephine had another young man who wanted to marry her. A Bantu. My competitor. She was having doubts about me because some family members were telling her that my family lived in the deep forest. 'How could you think of living there?' they asked her. Because she was not quite sure where I was from, she came to ask me. When I told her 'the Kasachi Forest', she had never even heard of the place! I told her that although that was where I was from, it was not where we were going to stay if we married.

There was a lady who knew me well and was friends with Josephine's mum. 'Isaac is a good boy, I know him,' she told Josephine's mum. 'If your daughter marries him, she would have found a good husband.'

However like me, my competitor had been telling Josephine that if she married him they would not go back to the forest and would stay in town. But my competitor was from a forest even further away than the Kasachi Forest. In the end Tuteene, Josephine's brother who I knew from primary school in Bunyakiri, convinced Josephine that I was better than my competitor and told her that as both me and my competitor were from the forest this should not influence her decision. In March 1981, three months after I first proposed, Josephine finally accepted.

We went to tell Josephine's parents of our decision. Her mother did not support us but she told Josephine, 'If that is your choice, and you love him, I can't stop you marrying.' ...

My mama was not happy. 'Look,' she said, 'you are marrying someone from a rich family. Town girls don't know how to look for crabs or firewood, and she is not going to be able to walk far. She won't even be able to walk to our home!'

Where my parents lived was a long way from Bunyakiri and Mama wanted me to marry a girl from the forest. Papa didn't say anything.



Left to right: Michael & Isaac speak at an international conference on Pygmy rights; Pygmy rights march, Congo; The family Bacirongo with their neighbours, Australia; and Isaac in one of the many Surry Hills cafes where he and Michael drafted *Still a Pygmy*.