

Still a Pygmy charts migrant's journey to a new life

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Isaac Bacirongo and his family. From the book *Still a Pygmy*. Source: Supplied

THIS is one of the most unusual and fascinating memoirs I have read in many years.

Written with the aid of Michael Nest, a freelance researcher with a PhD in African politics, *Still A Pygmy* documents how Isaac Bacirongo — a BaTembo Pygmy from the forests of the Democratic Republic of the Congo — moved to Sydney with his wife Josephine and their 10 children.

The only member of his extended family to go to school and also for a while to become a Christian — in his case a Jehovah's Witness — Bacirongo helped establish Congo's first Pygmy rights organisation.

However, after having been jailed and brutalised by the police acting under instructions from long-serving authoritarian president Mobutu Sese Seko, he was compelled by circumstances beyond his control to escape Africa and migrate here in 2003.

Even before this harassment, for him earning a living in the corrupt Congo was tough. As he puts it, "doing business there is like being surrounded by crocodiles. You have to feed them a bit to keep them away."

This singular story of Bacirongo's fight to save his identity from extinction interweaves details about the primitive life in the forests of Congo — replete with sorcerers and witchcraft, and catching and eating monkeys and rats — with his often acute observations about what it is like for a Pygmy to be living in 21st-century Australia.

When he first arrived at Fairfield in western Sydney, Bacirongo and his family could have burst with joy. As he explains: "My chest was full of happiness. The government gave us

about \$1800 each fortnight to survive. Free money. It was a miracle! This is the kind of miracle I can believe in, unlike witchcraft or the Holy Spirit.”

Moreover, he noticed that in Australia there was an abundance of food — and he and his family could afford to buy it. Even when he briefly did well as a businessman in Congo, and life was good, he had never bought an entire lamb or a whole leg of cow, which he was able to do in Sydney. Plus the family could eat fresh fruit and drink fresh milk every morning. And not all that long after coming to Sydney, Bacirongo was able to get a mortgage and buy his own home.

Unsurprisingly, though, because of a huge clash of cultures, life wasn't all smooth sailing for the Bacirongos. In part this was because Isaac's mother, who hailed from the forests, came to stay. As is revealed in this intriguing book, while in Congo Mama had hired a sorceress to kill Josephine so Isaac could marry some other woman who she regarded as more suitable and who wouldn't lead her son astray from their traditional life and values. It is therefore not surprising that Josephine was rather anxious about Isaac's mother being too close.

However, in Australia the main problem was between Bacirongo and some of his children, whom he sought to discipline and keep under control. Indeed one of his daughters, Bikulo, successfully took out an apprehended violence order against her father because he punished her physically. Eventually in 2013 the AVO was removed.

Apart from his all-consuming and largely unsuccessful battle to get a job here or to start a successful business, Bacirongo's main trouble was with his sixth child, and third son, Abishay, who was studying at Macquarie University.

As *Still A Pygmy* makes clear, Abishay, who had obtained a private pilot's license and had previously given presentations about Pygmies at school and at a City of Fairfield event, developed a severe mental illness. This involved him becoming obsessed about why Pygmies were still so discriminated against.

As a result of this obsession, Abishay decided to return to Congo. In particular he wanted to go back to his family's ancestral Kasachi Forest and to experience life there, as this fine book puts it, “surely with a view to exploring his roots and making peace with his heritage”.

Bikulo, who was born two years after Abishay and to whom he was very close, gave him money for the airfare. On the way back to the forests, he stopped at the Congo city of Bukavu, which borders with Rwanda, to catch up with family friends. Sadly, while swimming in Lake Kivu in January last year, Abishay drowned.

As Isaac Bacirongo explains, like his beloved dead son he still thinks a lot about being a Pygmy. For Bacirongo this is natural: “I can't lose my nature just because I am out of the forest, or because of living a new life. I was born like this, it's in my blood and I can't change it.”

Bacirongo's intention is that, by reading this memoir, others can better understand Pygmies. He also hopes that readers will come to realise that, as with most indigenous people, while they have many abilities, Pygmies often do not have the same opportunities as others.

As he puts it: “We have been disadvantaged by the human system, let me even say oppressed. That is why I wanted to tell my story, to educate people about Pygmies.”

In his often-idiosyncratic memoir, and with the considerable aid of Nest, Bacirongo has succeeded admirably in this task.

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Still a Pygmy, By Isaac Bacirongo and Michael Nest

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