The Mbuti

The Mbuti, also called the Bambuti, people live in the Ituri Forest of eastern Congo. These people are perhaps most famous for their height. They are some of the shortest people in the world, averaging only four feet six inches tall, and often called pygmies. They have a rather unorganized society in the way that a central structure doesn’t really exist. They have no chiefs, priests, legal systems, or clan of elders. However, they manage to be almost completely independent. They do have relations with nearby farming villages, but this relationship is more one of convenience rather than dependence. Unlike any culture surrounding them, the Mbuti people are hunter gatherers. They forage in the Ituri Forest and they are well known for hunting elephants, among other animals (Turnbull 1965).

These people live in clans of about fifteen to sixty people, but their population totals about thirty to fifty thousand (Turnbull 1962). They live in small, round houses that are often temporary. Their food generally consists of ants, larvae, snails, pigs, antelopes, monkeys, honey, yams, berries, roots, cola nuts, palm trees, bananas and leaves. There are other food sources readily available to them that they seem to show no interest in, like fish, which shows that they have an abundance of food sources in the forest and they have perfected their methods of getting food. The Mbuti are different than other hunting and gathering
communities because both sexes participate in hunting and gathering. The women and children often assist in hunting by driving their prey into large nets, however only the men hunt with bows and arrows. They do some trading with nearby village people, using trading their meat for iron and wood goods, and in some cases agricultural goods (Turnbull 1965).

The rather unstructured system also stretches into their lineage system. They tend to be patrilineal but this is not always what occurs. A common practice in Mbuti clans is exchanging sisters, or other related females to other clans in exchange for women that the men then marry. There is no marriage ceremony, instead a marriage is considered official when a man presents his bride’s family with an antelope that he has killed on his own. Generally, the Mbuti are patrilocal, so the couple would live with the husband’s clan, but this is also a very informal custom. Polygyny also occurs at a very low rate (Putnam 1948).

When a child is born there are certain traditions that the people follow. The child must be born in the forest or in the family’s hut. Immediately after birth, the father cuts the umbilical cord with an arrowhead or a knife that belongs to him. After this the mother and father spend several days secluded in their hut with their new child. The forest is involved in the child’s birth as well. A few days after the child is born it is bathed in the water taken from a certain vine and
wrapped in the barkcloth. This symbolizes the birth of the child to the forest (Turnbull 1965).

This concentration on the forest also extends to their spiritual beliefs. They do not have a specific religion, but their strong belief in the forest can be classified as a religion. The forest is believed to be a sacred place and is referred to as the great protector or provider (Turnbull 1965). Turnbull says, “…the Forest is principally identified in some contexts as ‘father’ and ‘mother,’ in other words as ‘sibling’ and ‘lover’” (1965).

The Nuer

The Nuer people live in Southern Sudan in eastern Africa. They are agricultural pastoralists who live in small villages that range from about fifty to several hundred people. The people tend to separate during the rainy part of the year, but they are still involved with each other. During the dry season they come back together, when food is scarcer. The Nuer rarely ever have a surplus of food and every few years, based on the weather, they experience a severe lack of food and extreme famine. Food is the most abundant between the months of September and December. This is when the people practice dances and ceremonies (Evans-Pritchard 1940). Most of their food consists of fish, cattle and other small animals.
The technology that the Nuer have is relatively simple due to the fact that iron and stone are not very common in the area. The trees nearby are also very small and are of little use other than for small buildings like huts. This is, in addition to the lack of food, why the people in the villages tend to live relatively close to each other (Evans-Pritchard 1940). West of the Nile River these tribes tend to be smaller, and are larger east of the Nile. Their total population is around three to four-hundred thousand. These people have dialectical differences throughout the area; however they do have a common mythology (Evans-Pritchard 1933).

The Nuer have a major focus on cattle. The men are very strong and proud and they believe that the only job that a man should do is herd cattle. The men are very attached to their cattle and it is practically a religion for them. The main sport that the men practice is cattle fighting. In fact, cattle fighting is so important that it has actually caused conflict between tribes (Huffman 1931).

**The Libyan Bedouins**

The Bedouin culture spans over much of Northern Africa and the Middle East. There are substantial populations in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Sudan, Algeria, Syria, Yemen, Qatar, Israel, Yemen, Palestine, Egypt, etc. The term
Bedouin means “those in the desert” and encompasses many people (Obermeyer 1973).

The Libyan Bedouins live in the Libyan Desert, also known as the Western Desert in Egypt. They live in small clans or tribes and are partially nomadic. About half of the population makes their living by herding animals, specifically sheep. Sheep are seen as a sign of wealth, because someone has to have a decent amount of money to be able to afford sheep. The other half of the population makes a living by fishing, trading, agriculture, or stone-cutting. The main crop grown by these people is barley. Some of them also own sheep and hire professional herdsman to care for them. A small percentage of the population lives in the south and practices camel herding, making them completely nomadic (Abou-Zeid 1959).

Living in the desert a main concern for the Libyan Bedouin is water. There is an absence of surface water, low rainfall and the wet season is very short in this area. There are some wells in the northern part of their territory; however most rely on the unpredictable rain water. This can create a problem because the rains can be very sporadic and most of it is lost when it seeps into the sand or evaporates into the air. Due to this there are often years when the people migrate to the Nile Delta. The water situation really influences whether the people live in a single location or if they migrate (Abou-Zeid 1959).
Burial Practices and Funerals

This topic is fairly broad because it encompasses everything that happens after a person dies. This includes how the body is preserved after death, the amount of time between the death and the burial, where and how the body is buried, the role of grave goods, any rituals surrounding the death, and overall how the person is honored. Every culture has some form of burial rituals and they are often different from culture to culture.

Mbuti Burial Practices and Funerals

The Mbuti have very strict customs when it comes to their burials. After a person dies, they may wait a few days to bury the deceased. This is done so that the family members of the deceased who may be visiting other camps can come pay their respects (Putnam 1948). The grave is dug by some of the men in the camp, including the deceased’s eldest son, if they have one (Turnbull 1965). The grave must also be dug near the current camp (Beierle 1995). All of the clan members throw dirt into the grave to fill it in. The family covers themselves in white clay (Turnbull 1965). After this the whole clan eats bananas and drinks wine (Putnam 1948). The women in the clan all cry hysterically and sometimes they cry so long that they take breaks together. After all the women take a break together they often go back to crying hysterically. Only some of the members are
buried with grave goods. The more important members of the clan are buried with goods like food, tobacco and weapons. After the whole funeral ritual is done the members of the clan must tear down the huts and abandon the camp (Turnbull 1965).

**Nuer Burial Practices and Funerals**

After a member of the Nuer culture dies, they are immediately buried. The grave is dug to the left of the person’s hut (Butt 1952). The women are buried facing west and the men are buried facing east. The person is placed in the grave with one arm under their head and one arm over their head. There are some differences between the way men and women are buried. The men are buried as naked as they came into the world. The women, however, are buried clothed. The grave diggers are generally the men in the person’s family. They dig the grave to a very specific site. They dig the grave so that it is as deep as where the deceased’s chest would be if they were standing up. This is done for a very important reason. They believe that if the grave is shallower than this then it will be too shallow. If the grave is to shallow then the hyenas can get to it. They see this as a very bad thing because if the hyenas get to the grave then the deceased will haunt those who dug his or her grave (Evans-Pritchard 1956). There are also specific rules about who can participate in the burial and funeral
practices. Anyone that is younger or the same age as the person that has died may not participate in any of the burial rituals (Butt 1952). After the whole burial ceremony is completed, the family of the deceased will dip wild rice in water and sprinkle it over the grave diggers. This is done as a cleansing ritual. The family must also be cleansed. Any family member that lived in the house with the deceased are cleansed and the ghost of the deceased is told not to trouble the living (Evans-Pritchard 1956).

Libyan Bedouin Burial Practices and Funerals

The burial ceremonies for the Libyan Bedouin last for a week. For them, crying is a ritualistic thing. It is not exactly what we think of as crying though. It is more of a chant of sadness. This crying is only done by the women in the culture; the men generally do not cry. There are certain days after the person’s death that certain members of the family and friends are allowed to come to the burial site and mourn. Each mourner will kneel in front of a member of the deceased’s family. This is generally the person in the family that the mourner is closest to. They will then cry together. There are specific beliefs about burying children. If a child dies, they are buried face up. Stones are put under the child’s head because it is believed that they will keep the child from rolling over so that they are face down. The Libyan Bedouin believe that if a child turns over, so that they
are facing down, that the mother of that child cannot get pregnant again. If the mother of a deceased child is having problems conceiving another child, it is believed that the child has turned over in their grave. The only way for the mother to be able to conceive again, is for the child to be turned back over. This has to be done directly by the mother. She will go out to the child’s grave, dig him or her up, and turn them back over (Abu-Lughod 1986).
Works Cited


