

The Stones Ethnographers Trip Over: Thoughts on Colin Turnbull's *The Forest People*

In my first course in cultural anthropology, more than thirty years ago during the heyday of structuralism and functionalism, the first ethnography we students read was *The Forest People*. With that imprimatur of sorts, *The Forest People* seemed to me the model we were being advised to follow, an icon of ethnography. I never recovered from that impression as I struggled with the rest of the anthropology I read during my student career. What did these other people think they were doing with their arcane discussions and their technical analyses of symbolism and systems? I never found out. Thirty years later, neophyte students are still initiated by Colin Turnbull, while the products of his contemporaries are dismissed as flawed or at least outmoded by changing questions and sensitivities.

My assumption that *The Forest People* was what an ethnography was supposed to be was grounded in its way. I grew up reading storybooks about children in other countries, as many children still do. For me, after Babar and other children's books of the time, I went through all of Hugh Lofting's Dr. Dolittle books and all of Frank Baum's Oz books. I read about wonderful people in other times and places. I read mythology and science fiction. But the real standard was set by Richard Halliburton's *Book of Marvels*. Nearly forty years after I read that book, I still remember the way that Halliburton took me with him on his travels. I jumped into the sacrificial well at Chichen Itza. I wandered at Machu Pichu with the last of the hundred Maidens of the Sun, looking at ninety-nine graves, in pitiful apprehension of her own unburied body. I climbed the Great Pyramid and Mt. Fuji. I was moved to learn of Halliburton's death at an early age.

Now that Colin Turnbull has also passed on, I find myself thinking about his legacy. I realize now that Turnbull was like the Halliburton of my pre-teenage fantasies. Turnbull waded across rivers where people had been eaten by crocodiles. He ran through the jungle at night. Didn't anyone ever step on a snake? When I was living as young adult in Ghana, most of the people I knew would not even walk across a lawn in the dark. But when I first read *The Forest People*, I was not consciously looking for another Halliburton, though now I see the debt my imagination owed to the vividness and immediacy of Halliburton's descriptions. *The Forest People* lived in my memory until I revisited it to write this essay. Those memories had the same clarity as my images from Halliburton. I remembered the sacred *molimo* trumpet that turned out to be a scavenged piece of metal drainpipe. I remembered Turnbull's description of his friend and associate

Kenge's inability to distinguish the scale of the animals he saw from a distant perspective overlooking a vast plain. And most particularly I remembered Kenge dancing his "dance of love and life" with the forest, alone in the moonlight.

If anthropologists still rely on *The Forest People* to capture the imagination of their students, perhaps they are touching a secret longing that there were more books like it. The book's original foreword by Harry L. Shapiro, then Chairman and Curator of Physical Anthropology at the American Museum of Natural History, should have been a warning of sorts. Shapiro said that *The Forest People* is an "exceptional" book, that reading the book is "an unusual and satisfying experience." Why should the words "unusual" and "satisfying" be linked? Shapiro virtually apologizes for the "technical reports in which individuals are swallowed up by abstractions and feeling is replaced by analysis. There is nothing wrong with this for the purpose it serves. But" That big "but": it has been a convenient emblem for anthropologists to stick out their windows and hang on their doors. Anthropologists generally have turned their backs on the "non-technical, humanized, and personalized view" while unconvincingly reserving their claim to the special sympathy and understanding necessary to interpret the lifeways of non-Western peoples.

Even now that anthropologists have made it their cause to be self-conscious about the power of their descriptions, they still suspect the personal. Their acceptance of hermeneutic theory and reflexive inquiry still leads them into technical territory where the terminology recalls formalism and ideology, where the model of the ethnographic text is held to the criteria of alienated criticism. They should know better. The goal of hermeneutics is not interpretation but transformation, and the reflexive core of our ethnographies is achieved when we acknowledge that our work is grounded in our own historical problem. What could be more personal, and what could be more attuned to an informed understanding of contemporary theory? In this day and age, what needs to be proved or disproved? What can be?

For me, the question that *The Forest People* raised was correlated, perhaps even a corollary, to Shapiro's foreword. I did not ask why *The Forest People* was an exceptional book: I wondered why there were not more books like it. I assumed that many students of anthropology began their careers or avocations with *The Forest People*. If it was just a trick to get most of them hooked into more serious stuff, an appeal to childish imagination and personal sympathy, I myself was not detoured by maturity. I did not put away my reading of the book as I became more sophisticated and experienced. Years later, my Dagbamba mentors gave me a proverb: when you knock your leg on a stone and fall down, you should look at the stone and not at the place you fell. They were advising me

about the good intentions and feelings that bound us together, as the stone that I should look at whenever our relationship might become problematic or whenever it would be represented in my writing. I understood that proverb. When I wrote *African Rhythm and African Sensibility*, I tried not to write a sentence without thinking of them, so that my book would reflect the evolution of the simple affinity we felt for one another as human beings. As it turned out, I was probably not alone with my question. Scattered along the way have been more than a few books that could share the influence of *The Forest People*, books that last, books that move people. It seems, though, that they often stand in marginal relation to the contributions that build a scholar's career. To me, too, it is neither insignificant nor odd that these tangential and unconventional books should often be first works done by youthful seekers, or late works, done by old men and old women who are looking beyond themselves.

What was Turnbull trying to prove? Even as Turnbull covered all the necessary topics of an ethnographic portrait, the abiding motif of *The Forest People* is an ironic commentary on normative studies. Throughout the book, Turnbull describes himself as being more serious than the Pygmies. He is looking for the serious application of social rules or for ritual seriousness, and the Pygmies joke about everything. Time and again, Turnbull contrasts his sense of ethnographic purpose with the Pygmies' continuing emphasis on personal whim and their society's corresponding looseness of normative structures that would ordinarily be the very point of an ethnographic effort. With this literary device, Turnbull authorized the Pygmies to stand for me and probably many other readers in rejecting the normative anthropology of the day. Through another brilliant device, Turnbull both transcended his contrived role to realize his unity with the Pygmies and also avoided posing an essential contrast between their world and that of our Western societies. Instead, he replaced the contrast between Western and Pygmy by posing a contrast between the Pygmies' world and that of the nearby Bantu villagers. Onto these latter peoples -- the BaBira, BaLese and others -- Turnbull projected the fantasies of domination, superiority, order and moral rectitude that were continually belied and inverted by the Pygmies. The Bantus looked down on the Pygmies and vice versa, and Turnbull used their opposition to make *The Forest People* a treatise on cultural comparison. The Pygmies lacked what the Bantus thought important in cultural life. Compared to what? *The Forest People* represents the Pygmies as rich in ways the Bantus did not comprehend, nor for that matter, would an anthropology bent on advancing itself through science.

Turnbull must have tripped over some different stones from most of the anthropologists of his day. His first chapter provided an indirect clue with its

strange introductory overview of previous literature. As Turnbull surveyed the written records of Pygmy culture, the central characteristic he held to compare his own experience with the other portraits was Pygmy music. He was skeptical of anyone who did not mention or convey a sense of the Pygmy's continual singing and dancing. This standard was not the typical one, to say the least, but Turnbull somehow made it credible. (His recordings of their astounding music are another great legacy of his work with them.) But Turnbull gave more direct clues to his particular field of stones in his acknowledgments. His first acknowledgment presented his idea of how he really prepared for fieldwork: "In whatever measure this book succeeds it is due to those who by their example have taught me the way to understanding. More than any I must thank my parents, who first taught me the meaning of love, and Anandamai Ma, who for two years in India showed how the qualities of truth, goodness and beauty can be found wherever we care to look for them." He thus linked his results to his study of Eastern spirituality and his consciousness of universalism. With his second acknowledgment, to his teacher Evans-Pritchard, he linked himself to the great tradition of extended fieldwork. His third acknowledgment was to Harry Shapiro and the institution that gave him shelter. Fourth, he acknowledged those who opened the doors for his entry to the world of the forest, those whose legacy was not written but who had devoted their lives to the people of the forest, who themselves received his final acknowledgment and whose wisdom and love he hoped his book might portray.

Turnbull no doubt paid a price for writing a book that others who could not emulate nonetheless found indispensable for their introductory courses. Lacking his sentience, even many who worked with the Pygmies could not attain his perspective. Some even took him as a figure to challenge. But people still read *The Forest People*. Where are his critic's works now? In the book, Turnbull himself mentions taking "copious notes" about different groups of people. Where is the specialized information he did not put into *The Forest People*? The book was obviously written by plan, with purposeful selectivity. It stands on its own as a vision of love and unexpected affinities. I remember seeing a documentary Turnbull made: he was standing beside some Pygmies who were smoking huge pipes of marijuana. (I wish he had been more explicit about their being stoned so much; I would have better understood some of the scenes he described.) In the film, Turnbull towered above the Pygmies and looked amazingly out of place. But from his book, we know that he was there, deeply involved and in tune with the people and their world. Nowadays, we read *The Forest People* for a glimpse of that achievement.

Has there been progress in anthropology? Certainly, the passage of time has given us some splendid books that can stand beside *The Forest People*. And

certainly, most of those at the cutting edge of the discipline believe that we are now more sensitive to the issues of anthropological work. The normative anthropology of Turnbull's day has been criticized and either disavowed or refined. We may feel that the increased and broader perspective of our time implies an ascent, for it is normal that those who believe in progress look back at the work of the past and find themselves looking downward. But the depth of Turnbull's involvement has remained a rare achievement, and many anthropologists are aware that the reason may be that people do not dwell as long in the field as Turnbull and his predecessors and contemporaries did. I sometimes wonder, therefore, what the significance of our theoretical issues are or whether we have done well to embrace developments in the discipline that neglect the deeper configurations of motive our predecessors saw at work in society. If we know that, for whatever circumstances of resources or professional obligations, we no longer spend as much time in the field, why should we expect our ethnographies to be better? Can we presume that our sensitivities are so acute that they offer a shortcut to the type of understanding our predecessors took so much longer to accomplish? I am not sure. I believe that the *The Forest People* is still significant and is still read because we all remember the stones we tripped over, and we realize that our ethnographic work should acknowledge the validity of those initial motives that could take us to far away places and enable us to stay with the people there.

Citations:

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Original publication:

“Die Stolpersteine der Ethnographen” [translated from “The Stones Ethnographers Trip Over”] in *Wegmarken: Eine Bibliothek der Ethnologische Imagination. Trickster Jahrbuch*. Munich: Peter Hammer Verlag, 1998, pp. 22-28.