

..Makoko

..Cartagena

..Nat Pwe

..Oslo

# Makoko by Joshua Bullish

The road ends at a pygmy village in West Africa. Francophone Gabon. A clearing in the furthest western reaches of the Congo Rainforest. Two days' drive from Libreville and the Atlantic, the last miles of the journey up an old logging track. Gullies bridged by rails of felled trees. Gut-wrenching crossings for our flatbed trucks laden with camera equipment and supplies.

A pygmy? None taller than my shoulder. Not black like the Bantu majority of Gabon, the Baka are a dark mahogany, the colour of red earth, broad for their height, wiry-shouldered, their arms cabled with sinews.

In small patches of forest, they fell the red-hearted *dibetou* and the tall *okoumé* with the smallest of axe-heads. They chop diagonally down, then horizontally, carving a wedge out of the trunk four feet up until the giants murmur and the thud-thud-thud of the small man and his small axe reverberates up 100 feet of tree. When it looks like toppling, he moves to the other side and cuts a notch a little above the first to finish the job.

They grin and joke as they work. Sometimes they leave a tree teetering on a splinter then fell another higher up the hillside to domino the first. They cry something like 'timber' too and this man's work brings them delight. Back in the village of mud huts, the women have brought back smaller branches in wicker panniers. Doughty ladies of the forest, their cloth shawls are slung with infants who sleep on as the world around them reels. The women lay the firewood in spokes radiating out from the fire, the wheel getting smaller as night comes.

On it they place *la marmite*, the charred pot in which they boil tuberous and tasteless manioc for hours. It is cultivated in the small glades the men have cleared. Nothing else is grown. There are some goats and chickens, but I never see eggs eaten or livestock milked. The children's bellies swell from lack of protein. Meat comes from the forest via the arrow or the village's one ancient rifle, which has three



bullets. Here life and death are a matter of inches, the slow kind and the fast. Woe betide the hunter who does not make his bullet count. I watch a man return, a monkey worn about his torso, strapped by its own tail like a bag for the journey back. The hunter grins at his self-evident skill and drops it on a fire. We watch the fur slowly char and smell the flesh cook.

Some of the creatures taken from the forest are the stuff of fiction. Their dead alien shapes speak of an impenetrable vastness, a storybook heart of darkness whose fantasies are as real as our imaginations will have them. The hunters bring a pig-like creature similar to the Amazonian tapir, but with cloven feet not trotters – and horns. Years on I still don't know its name.

Sometimes I turn off the village path down to the river and walk a few metres into the jungle. I close my eyes and listen. I'm frightened by what I hear. Scrabbling, rooting, rustling, crashing and scraping; the sound of life in all directions moving on without me. I open my eyes and drown in the chlorophyll density, my path lost. The insignificant, godless, telescoped smallness rushing in on me.

For a month we never see the stars through the unending cloud above the treetops. The universe is abstract, everything not Makoko becomes an idea. But the jungle stays real and the villagers fear its darkness. When night falls at 7pm we are all in bed, locked in safe from what might stir outside.

Some days I walk out of the village along the old logging road and see

bamboo stems snapped by gorilla and chimpanzee, the fibres still green from their passing. One time I round a corner and in the thicket flanking the road there is a hole the size of a bus. "Elephants," says my guide. "Perhaps two days." We are half a kilometre from Makoko and never heard a thing. On another walk, I come to a rise that overlooks a rare area of scrubland; an old grove the men cleared several years before. Two giant hornbills soar across the emptiness. Suddenly there are pterodactyls in the limitless woodland. I remember shuddering. A bird book can only dispel the notion so far; there is no writing in the forest, only stories.

Mama Tito is the senior woman of the village and I suspect its *de facto* chief. She has this honour because she is the mother of twins, a blessed office. She has a terrible story to tell about the forest. Harsh, cantankerous eyes soften then weep as she tells it.

"One day my boy went to a certain tree, a magic tree. This tree no one like him should touch. It is forbidden. When he came back he was sick. He went into the hut to tell me what he had done. He fell sicker and there was blood in his trousers. Then he died. We were crying when the men came. They were carrying my other boy. He was playing in the forest. He had fallen dead. The same day.

"When they buried them, half went this way, half the other. They buried my twins and when they came back the two met in front of me here. They said to me, 'It is done Mama Tito, you must never think on this again.' But I do."



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Makoko was given a sacred gift, then had it taken away. I understand that for all its kindness and warm-hearted people, the village is cursed. None more so than the Chief. I accept his invitation to see the hut he is building for himself. It is a forlorn patch of earth, spiked with stakes, without a roof or a single mud brick laid. His French is a broken collection of words whose meaning he pushes on me with a hopeful smile. He is drunk. Always. Which is why he has been building through two rains – over a year – and achieved nothing. The Baka are not builders or craftsmen. They don't even fletch their arrows.

The Gabonese government moved groups like this to fixed villages of mud and straw houses with palm-leaf roofs in the 1960s. Their wanderings were stopped to let the logging companies and mineral prospectors move in unimpeded. Perhaps it was charity as well as greed. Whatever it was, forty years have irreparably separated the Baka of Makoko from their ancestors.

One morning I see a villager quietly ask permission of the trees for something. The spirits of the Baka's ancestors live all around them, they have no other gods. The forest is their past as well as their future. Their Time as well as Place, the history that witnesses their decline while the world moves away and takes their children with them. I sense the Chief understands that passing. It is the reason he pours palm wine down his throat like a captain stripped of his charts.

When it is time for us to leave the village, the atmosphere changes. Our hut is a palace of mosquito nets and mattresses. My fishing rod is negotiated for. Even our cheap cutlery is eyed like the finest silver. As our two jeeps roll out of the village, we can see our hut being ransacked, flagons of sunflower oil being divided, sacks of rice carried off like booty. The forest and its people ironing out the creases of our passing.



On the way back to Libreville we stay in a decrepit hotel on the fringes of the forest, a relic left from French colonial days. At the bar I meet an ex-logger prospecting and mapping the forest for an oil company. When I tell him about Makoko, he shakes his head in wonder and falls silent for a while. Finally he speaks, choosing his words carefully.

"These are not real pygmies. Real pygmies know nothing of houses or money. When they hear us coming they go deeper. If they choose it, we will never see them. My father and mother, when they first came to Gabon from France, knew real pygmies. They came out of the forest as my parents were building their house. They lived with them and protected them. When the house was built my father put francs in their hand. They looked at him and asked what they were. Do you know the most we could ever do for the pygmies?"

And I know the answer before he even says the words.

"Forget they exist."

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