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References

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Section:

AFRICA

Who Rules the Forest?

IN CENTRAL AFRICA, WAR AND INNOCENCE COLLIDE IN A TALE OF PYGMIES, REBELS, SORCERERS, AND DREAMERS.

The hunt

Rain forests are light-struck places. This comes as a surprise. Countless books and movies would have us believe otherwise. The world beneath a jungle canopy is neither dim, nor gloomy, nor monochrome. It glows with the light of some alien order--a light so improbable it has a dreamed quality, the way colors in dreams can possess actual weight, or create sound, or stop time.

I have looked up, startled, from my notebook to see the forest suddenly electric white: suffused with the calm, almost glacial cleanliness of a fluorescent-lit office. A few moments later, or merely a few steps away, the jungle turns metallic. Falling rain, leaf shadows, the bloodied pelt of an arrowed monkey--all appear dipped in shivery tones of silver. Once, on the steamy banks of the Ituri River, I saw the twilight undergrowth erupt in unearthly constellations of fire: Sunset burned through the pin-holed canopy, and its deep, red laminar shafts spattered the sodden leaves like flecks of lava. Rain forests, everyone knows, are valued for biodiversity. But few credit the kaleidoscopic richness of their light--ethereal and hallucinatory, filtered as though through antique glass, unlike any other in the world.

Right now, at this precise instant, the jungle is blue--rinsed the color of indigo ink diluted in water, its shadows deep as the bluing on a gun.

Musa Yambuka's glistening eyes are stained pale blue. The sweat on his face sparkles star blue. He's an Mbuti Pygmy, a small, perfectly muscled man, crouched with a spear behind the roots of a fig tree, waiting to ambush a forest antelope. (These animals, too, are smoky blue, a fact noted in their Western name, blue duiker.) The moment is a thousand or more years old. The beaters come yodeling through the forest, driving the game before them. Musa tenses, digs in his toes, ready to spring, to slice something's throat. In the canopy, the monkeys grow still, fall silent. I hear an invisible bird flap away.

I have seen this scene 20, maybe 30 times now. We have been traveling together for days, the Mbuti and I, through the jungle of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Pygmies do things that most humans forgot a long time ago. Like drive cat-size antelope into nets. Or live in adult accord with pain and sudden death. Or mold soccer balls out of the sap from a certain liana. All of this, of course, is interesting. But what distracts me more than ever, what's got me disoriented, even a little spooked--my eyes, these days, seem like borrowed things--isn't what these people do as much as the light they do it in: this miraculous and enigmatic empire of color that only the Mbuti know.

It shifts again.

Musa's ferocious grin shines aquamarine. The drivers approach through a white-hot slab of brilliance that could burn diamonds. Dazzled, I look down at what, apparently, are my hands. In the bottom-of-the-sea sheen of the forest, the skin looks insubstantial. Almost translucent. The hands of a ghost.

I hold my breath.

Maybe birth is like this.

The road Isabella Rossellini could fix (if only she knew about it)

To reach the land of the Mbuti--a 23,000-square-mile greenhouse called the Ituri forest--you must follow men who push bicycles.

This isn't difficult. You will find them trudging, antlike, across the wilds of eastern Congo. Jackknifed at the waist, generally emaciated, their eyes glazed with exhaustion, they manhandle bikes that sag under mountains of goods: bundles of rice and gold dust, women's underwear and bullets, live goats and coffins, jugs of gasoline and cases of Coca-Cola. Some of these cargoes tilt and spill into the mud. Others bounce wildly down steep hills and explode across jungle trails. No matter. Slowly, with stupefying patience, the cyclists stoop and gather up their battered merchandise; they plod onward, advancing at the pace of a convict's shuffle, rolling their burdens over the belly of a continent.

These are Congo's toleka traders.

"We use drugs to keep going," says a scarecrow named Kambale Vivalya.

I meet Vivalya while he is heaving an enormous sack of shoes--cheap plastic shoes--to a gold mine 300 miles away, on the far side of the Ituri.

"I take ibuprofen for pain and Indocin to keep awake," he says. "Otherwise you won't make it. Many people have died on this job. You get exhausted. You go home after a trip. You sleep. You don't wake up."

When we finally part, he shakes my hand politely and wishes me luck. I wipe the blood of his blistered palm on my trousers.

Few countries in the world have collapsed as disastrously by the wayside--regressed so starkly into preindustrial ruin--as Congo. Once called Zaire, the nation was picked clean during three decades of misrule by the dictator Mobutu Sese Seko, then gutted by more than six years of anarchy and civil war. Today Congo is the shell-shocked colossus of central Africa--a country almost the size of western Europe that seems to have sleepwalked into some feverish dream of the post-apocalypse.

Nowhere is the decay as surreal as on the roads that span the country's Wild East, a vast jungle

where the fighting has never stopped.

What words can be uttered about those roads? Clogged with mud, strangled by bush, reduced in many cases to absurd footpaths, they slither for hundreds of miles through a tropical forest second in size only to the Amazon. They span a landscape where the 20th century has ebbed like a neap tide, leaving behind the detritus of modernity: towns with trees growing from roofs, factories crumbling like Maya ruins, coffee plantations run wild.

The roads are no longer roads. They are Ho Chi Minh trails of survival. And in their shadow-smearred margins the Mbuti can be glimpsed, shy, silent, watchful. In many cases it is their own world, dismantled and repackaged into sellable commodities, which they see passing by. The Pygmies covet, as we all would, the aluminum pots, cigarettes, and manufactured clothing carried by Congo's bicycle caravans. Yet in exchange, loads of timber, wild meat, and gold are streaming out of their forest home along the same tracks—a bonanza of raw materials swindled from the Pygmies by unscrupulous shopkeepers and middlemen. Moreover, the tiny hunters' ancient bonds of trade with local farmers—a quasi-feudal system that swaps Mbuti field labor and forest products for food crops and metal tools—are becoming frayed.

"They are easy to cheat," a roadside merchant says of the Pygmies along the way. "Like children."

In effect, the Mbuti are gaining their independence—which in Congo's feral east means they are free to lose everything to the tatterdemalion parade of pilgrims, many in far worse straits, who trod the dying remnants of the trans-African highways built by the colonial Belgians: the child soldiers in baggy new uniforms supplied by Russian gunrunners; the whores in blood-red ball gowns, bouncing atop toleka men's bicycles; the hollow-eyed refugees seeking sons, daughters, and parents long since vanished into the smoke of civil war; a rabble of small-time loggers, miners, and peddlers; and the howling, genocidal militias daubed with human blood and toothpaste (toothpaste sticks despite the rain and sweat).

I depart the frontier town of Beni at dawn on the back of a motorbike. The driver's name is Willy. He is a stoic in sunglasses. His reflexes—his balance—are things of rare beauty. For 11 brutal hours we penetrate the Ituri. We pass columns of traders who slog head down, sweating, through clouds of butterflies. Stinking bogs the size of swimming pools block the way. It is the worst road in the world.

"Ah, if only Isabella Rossellini knew our situation," an Italian priest says at a mission where I pause to rest. The padre, a veteran of Congo's chaos, explains that Rossellini, the glamorous international film star and daughter of Ingrid Bergman, donates to African conservation and philanthropic projects.

I am too exhausted to speak. Sore-assed, I can barely sit at the priest's dining table.

"Rossellini could help fix our road," he persists, "if only she knew about it." But his eyes betray him. He stares wistfully into his pasta. Because, of course, she doesn't know.

The "King of the Imbeciles"

Perusing a copy of *Echoes of the Pygmies*, a foreign-funded Congolese human rights quarterly, I notice the following headline: "THE MLC TRIES TO ERASE PROOF OF ITS CANNIBALISM OF PYGMIES IN THE ITURI."

MLC stands for the Movement for the Liberation of Congo, perhaps the strongest rebel group in the country. Its leader is a pudgy businessman named Jean-Pierre Bemba. In accordance with Congo's 2002 peace agreement, he has joined a weak transitional government as one of four vice

presidents. He wants to be president. And he has an image problem: His soldiers are known primarily for eating Pygmies.

More than three million people died in Congo's six years of civil strife, an internal scramble for power that saw one president assassinated and laid Congo open to the invading armies of at least six of its neighbors. The dead consist mainly of civilians. They perished mostly from starvation and disease: the worst human calamity since World War II. Yet, inevitably, it is Congo's lurid tales of cannibalism, its sensational stories of human sacrifice, its ornamental killings, which end up bubbling into the news.

Magical violence makes it easy for journalists to reach for Joseph Conrad's bleak fable, *Heart of Darkness*, every time a Congo headline is required. This fixation on "unspeakable" rites in "darkest Africa" obscures the actual origins of the war: bitter ethnic grudges and endless squabbles over an immense storehouse of gold, diamonds, timber, and coltan--a mineral used in high-tech electronics.

Still, this much is true: The miasma of juju is inescapable in Congo. It is like swamp vapor. Invisible. Pervasive. Soccer teams hire sorcerers to hex their rivals. Prostitutes pay good money for charms that make them irresistible. And in the nation's Wild East, the magic becomes explosive, toxic, like the volcanic gases that are trapped at the bottom of one of its deepest lakes.

In late 2002 rebel forces--led in part by a commander nicknamed the "King of the Imbeciles"--launched a terrible offensive in the Ituri forest. Towns were sacked. Women and girls were raped. Villagers were executed. Yet it was the rumors of cannibalized Pygmies that scandalized the world.

An Mbuti named Amuzati Nzoli, widely quoted in the international press, claims that rebels attacked his jungle camp, cut up his family, grilled them over a campfire, and "even sprinkled salt on the flesh as they ate."

I search for Nzoli in eastern Congo. I never find him. He and other "cannibalism witnesses" have been rounded up in the forest by rebel operatives and flown to the capital. There, under tight guard, and in front of television crews hastily summoned to the lobby of a luxury hotel, a stuttering, wide-eyed Nzoli recants his story. Yet no one in Congo believes him. As several Congolese tell me--Pygmies are subhuman. So anyone can eat them.

"Cannibalism here is both an ancient tribal practice and a modern instrument of terror," says one human rights worker with the 16,000-strong United Nations peacekeeping force in Congo. "But the attacks singling out Pygmies are new. The prevailing theory holds that soldiers ate them to absorb their unique forest powers--good vision, tracking skills, whatever."

One night in Beni I stop by a lightless and crumbling hotel. I have come to visit Maj. Edison Mungilima. He is a senior officer with the Mayi-Mayi--a Congolese militia that has battled almost every other faction in eastern Congo, including the MLC. I am curious about his thinking on the issue of cannibalism.

Mungilima greets me affably. He sits out under the stars in a lawn chair, dressed in military fatigues, a leopard-skin cape, and--despite the Congolese heat--a heavy fur-trimmed parka. He answers philosophically.

Fetishism has been part of warfare in Congo since the very beginning, Mungilima says. There is good magic and bad magic. It all depends on the purity of the individual soldier. Mungilima himself is a "liquid fighter," a warrior who can turn himself into water, so that the bullets pass harmlessly through him. Eating Pygmies, however, as the MLC is alleged to have done, is "offensive," he says;

at most, a Mayi-Mayi might cut off an enemy's head "to parade around a village as a flag of victory." (This is modesty. One Mayi-Mayi chief "went around with a dried infant around his neck," according to a recent human rights document.) Mungilima produces a photo album. Stenciled on its cover, in elegant gold script, is the word "Memories." It is filled with war porn, gory battlefield snapshots. As proof of his *dawa*, or magical power, Mungilima presents me with one of the pictures.

Later, under the yellow glare of a lightbulb, I look at it. Mungilima stands in full regalia. A white dog walks by in the foreground. The perspective is odd. It makes the warrior seem shrunken to half-size, as if he were a malevolent elf perched on the hound's back.

When I show this to a Congolese acquaintance, a worldly, educated man who manages an English-language institute, he stares hard. "That," he says finally, slowly, with great care, "is a very dangerous man."

The hunt

Musa the Pygmy has found a honey tree. This is an event. All hunting stops if *asali*, as it is called in Swahili, can be located and consumed.

Among the Mbuti the quest for wild honey is tireless, constant, almost obsessive. They have honeycomb on the brain. It is their favorite food. The honey season in the southern Ituri is measured out according to the cycle of flowering trees--the bees' main source of nectar. In June real honey production begins. This is white honey: Young, virtually transparent and cool to the taste, like a pale wine, or the first breaths of dawn. Later, by August, the honey is oil-dark. Black honey is strong, warm, musky with distilled sunlight and the nectar of tropical flowers.

"We like it all," Musa says unnecessarily. Then he knots together a 150-foot rope of lianas and does what must be done.

He and a hunter named Jolie, who at four feet tall is tiny even by Pygmy standards, shinny some 60 feet up the smooth, fat shaft of the tree to ax a hole in the trunk. The women send up a smoker fashioned from a basket of embers and leaves. Within minutes, to small yelps of anticipation, the combs are lowered like hunks of gold. Soon the entire band, stuffing their stomachs with pounds of sweet liquid, feels the sugar's glow. The men argue and holler at each other loudly. The women guffaw even louder at sex jokes. Somewhere up among the attic of leaves--30 or 40 feet off the ground--children as young as five or six, smeared with honey, bombed by angry African bees, are chattering with delight.

Tasting rain forest honey for the first time is an unforgettable experience. It goes quickly to the head. Its delicious perfume carries with it the suggestion of a better world. As it seeps directly from the membranes of the mouth into the bloodstream, yielding up its concentrated energy, generously radiating its stored warmth, a single word comes to mind: Yes.

The rift

John Hart, a sunburned American biologist, sits on a veranda in the town of Bukavu, sketching a map of Africa on a napkin. He draws a worrisome fault line that cracks through the very heart of the continent--a tectonic fissure that runs right under his table.

This is the Albertine Rift. It is the westernmost of the famous African rift valleys that began yawning wide some 30 million years ago as the Arabian Peninsula drifted away from the continent. The Albertine Rift is especially beautiful. It shadows Congo's eastern border, cupping a series of

enormous, limpid lakes in its belly, separating Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi from Congo proper.

This rift, Hart points out, also is a human quake zone. It's where francophone central Africa meets anglophone eastern Africa. It marks an economic divide between countries with few natural resources (Rwanda, Burundi) and one that overflows with them (Congo). Moreover, it is a violent ethnic front. The Hutu perpetrators of Rwanda's 1994 mass murder of the Tutsi escaped into Congo's jungles, sparking years of cross-border reprisals by Rwandan forces.

But to Hart, the most troubling divide of all is demographic: Along the Albertine Rift, population densities exceed 1,000 people per square mile; to the west, in Congo's vast, lawless rain forests, it drops to fewer than 10.

"All these people have to go somewhere, right?" he says, gesturing out beyond the farm-scalped hills around Bukavu. "It's inexorable. Unstoppable. This is Africa's last big frontier. All we can do is try to create islands of habitat that the crowds will hopefully flow around."

Hart works for the Bronx-based Wildlife Conservation Society. He is an odd mix of bluster and innocence--much like the Mbuti hunters he has lived among for two decades. He is known to chant Pygmy airs while driving. His goal is to protect enough Congolese forest from the advance of small, anarchic logging mills, settlers, and poachers to allow the Pygmies to conduct their nomadic lifestyle indefinitely.

He and other environmentalists are doing this in a postmodern way. They have internationalized the wilds of central Africa.

Imagine, for a moment, that the United States is prostrated by a civil war. Desperate bureaucrats in Washington, D.C., cut off by years of fighting, issue an SOS to foreign green groups: Please help rescue America's fabled national parks! British activists respond by funding the entire budget of Yellowstone National Park, where gangs of neo-Nazis are holed up, machine-gunning the last buffalo. Japanese wildlife experts, meanwhile, face gunfire while resupplying beleaguered National Park Service rangers at the Everglades, where armed profiteers are peddling real estate. Scores of American rangers have been killed.

This is conservation work in Congo.

"The war has been hard," Hart says, tipping back a warm beer. "But just wait until things stabilize. Wait until the big loggers think it's safe to move in. That's when the real plunder begins."

Looking up in Miti

Before leaving eastern Congo I drive to Miti. It is a typical Wild East village. Its road is ridiculous. The dozy market sells bush meat. Customers carry away their dead monkeys like valises; the animals' tails, lashed to their necks, form convenient handles.

There is a military checkpoint--the usual string tied across a street--where a 12-year-old with a Kalashnikov struts up to the car, shoves the muzzle of his rifle through the window, and demands a thousand-dollar "security tax" to let me pass. He settles for a Ugandan cigarette.

I have come to see David Bisimwa. Or rather, his famous helicopter.

Bisimwa is a slight, intense, energetic man of about 30 with the syrupy eyes of a dreamer. He is a self-taught artist and inventor. He is also a member of the Bashi tribe, farmers who have long coexisted in the rain forest with Congo's Pygmies. Only in Miti, the forest is mostly gone, gobbled

up by settlers. The Pygmies, here called the Twa, no longer hunt to survive. They are farm laborers. And the children of the old Bashi, squeezed by land hunger, now look beyond the depleted soils for inspiration.

Bisimwa has built, by hand in the Congolese jungle, using scraps of metal, pipes, and wire, a life-size replica of an old Sikorsky helicopter. He copied it out of magazines. When I first see the chopper beside the potholed road, two barefoot farmers are sprawled in the shade of its fuselage, absorbed in eating stalks of sugarcane.

"It's for research," Bisimwa explains. I stare at the machine dumbstruck. Faced with an artifact of such frustrated longing, I can't think of anything to say.

"Aeronautical research," he adds helpfully.

Finally, I ask him who the pilot is.

"I made it," Bisimwa says proudly. "I'll fly it."

Bisimwa says he has tested his helicopter only once, the year before. Powered by a borrowed Volkswagen engine, the rotors had raked up an impressive cloud of dust and spooked the local livestock--but, alas, to no practical effect. The racket is still commented on with awe in the village. Bisimwa had run out of money for further trials. A friend had reclaimed the engine and bolted it back into his car.

Bisimwa is one of Congo's stranded intelligentsia. His life's highlight was an all-expenses-paid trip to Japan to illustrate a book about gorillas. That was many years ago. Now, like thousands of other educated Congolese trapped in backwaters--many of them students who had ventured abroad during the long pax corrupta of dictator Mobutu--he finds himself reduced by war and poverty to rustic irrelevance. These doomed cosmopolitans are everywhere in Congo. During the war, in the rebel-held town of Gbadolite, I met a Belgian-trained chef who had prepared elaborate state banquets for President Valéry Giscard d'Estaing and other dignitaries. Clad in grimy shorts and scuffed wing tips--nothing else--he was hawking boiled eggs from a roadside stall. Earlier, on the Congo River, I shared a leaky dugout canoe with a linguist who, for hour after delightful hour, recited the works of the poet Robert Frost. (Whenever gunmen boarded to rob us--a frequent occurrence--he jabbed at them with a multicolored umbrella, bleating indignantly, "But I am a professor!")

What lies ahead for Congo's outlaw east?

Africa is the most unpredictable continent in the world. Yet no African nation confronts a future so unscripted, so fraught with disaster and sheer possibility, as the misnamed Democratic Republic of the Congo. Will war resume and Congo shatter into smaller, squabbling states? Possibly. Can the frail but hopeful peace last, allowing Congo finally to put its fabulous riches to work? Conceivably. Everything is so unclear, so unfathomable. An election scheduled for June 2005--the first truly democratic ballot since independence from Belgium in 1960 --has been postponed for at least six months. But UN experts warn that more than 100,000 rebels, bandits, militiamen, soldiers, and assorted other killers have yet to disarm. And the ethnic and political rumbling along the rift won't likely stop with a mere presidential poll. So with astonishing patience and good humor, millions of people in the center of Africa hold their breath.

Waking up in their kingdom of trees, the Pygmies peek out warily into the morning's half-light. The toleka men's eyes flutter open to yet another day on the road. A rebel soldier sits up abruptly, as

from a nightmare, and reaches for his gun. Will they all see the world they are expecting? Or will a gigantic chasm open up at their feet--an abyss that plummets to the very core of the Earth, into which they all will shortly tumble?

David Bisimwa, a visionary in flip-flop sandals, the lone Wright brother of the Congolese wilderness, has conquered such paralyzing uncertainty. He never looks down; he locks his eyes on the clouds.

The hunt

The sky is cleaving apart. It calves like a glacier-big, noisy chunks of atmosphere shearing off, crashing into the forest with reverberating booms. Gusts of cold air, like that of a refrigerator, rustle through the canopy, dislodging a confetti of leaves. Musa the Mbuti squints up, mutters ah-ah-ah at the storm.

Pygmies dislike rain. It is not only the clammy discomfort of moving through a damp forest. Water weakens the hunting nets. Antelope wriggle through the wet weave of liana bark like fish. Musa coils his net. He hulloos his farewell to the other hunters--a sound that is itself watery in the suddenly darkening jungle.

Darkness. It is not necessarily feared by the Mbuti. They have a feeling about it. Whatever the forest brings cannot be bad. Sometimes they sing this song over their dead:

There is darkness upon us;

Darkness is all around,

There is no light.

But it is the darkness of the forest,

So if it really must be,

Even the darkness is good.

Musa fires up a leaf-rolled marijuana joint. For fatigue. He passes it to Mayuma, his wife. She grips a slain duiker by its rear hooves--a small, jewel-like animal. Its dead eyes shine, and its hooves are not much bigger than a man's thumbs.

Smoking, they wait for their children to gather, and Musa holds Mayuma's gnarled left middle finger in his calloused right hand. A pleasant silence. They will sleep tonight in a small domed hut of mongongo leaves. Such huts are everywhere in the Ituri forest. They begin to decay into piles of powdery frass almost as soon as they are built. The Pygmies have erected them since the time when the forest was born. They will continue to do so for as long as the forest lasts.

INTERACT WITH AFRICA Experience the "miraculous and enigmatic empire of color" surrounding the Mbuti Pygmies with narration by photographer Randy Olson. Then join our forum: Can Africa's final frontier be preserved? Go to ngm.com/africa.

MAP: Deforestation threatens the central African rain forest. Congo's share, home to thousands of Pygmies, holds riches coveted by both the Congolese and densely populated nations to the east. (SOURCES: MATTHEW C. HANSEN AND ERIK LINDQUIST, SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY; BARRY S. HEWLETT, WASHINGTON STATE UNIV., VANCOUVER; TOM PATTERSON, NATIONAL PARK SERVICE; OAK RIDGE NATIONAL LABORATORY LANOSCAN2003; National Geographic Maps)

PHOTO (COLOR): Though blind, young Apatite Vecant (foreground) must see with other senses as he endures rites of manhood alongside his peers, learning to survive in the Ituri forest.

PHOTO (COLOR): THE THIN WHISPER OF SKIRTS dissolves into the rain forest as boys trail their elders on their way to a hunting camp. The Mbuti are one of several Pygmy groups still following semi-nomadic traditions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

PHOTO (COLOR): GIRLS DAUB EACH OTHER with clay in solidarity with the boys' initiation into manhood. Pygmies often beautify their bodies with paint, scarification, even tooth chipping.

PHOTO (COLOR): THE SOUND OF PIPES fills an Mbuti camp as men play by the fireside at dusk. Often whittled on the spot, each instrument is cut to play just one note; together they create the music of Mbuti life.

PHOTO (COLOR): His most prized possession: An Mbuti hunter carries a net of twined liana bark. The Mbuti drape nets between trees and flush antelope and other game toward them. Meat is exchanged with Bantu farmers for vegetables, grains, and other goods in an interdependent relationship.

PHOTO (COLOR): ON THE MOVE Life is motion, fluid and free for the Mbuti, who ferry the portable details of their lives from camp to camp and fashion everything else from scratch. Since fire is always needed, the women haul smoldering logs, along with knives and perhaps a pot or two packed in a basket.

PHOTO (COLOR): At camp, women pull saplings from the forest to assemble shelters, called endu. Each hunting lodge houses a single family and shrugs off showers with walls of mongongo leaves.

PHOTO (COLOR): The flow of life on the trail stops abruptly upon the discovery of a beehive, and all minds focus on honey. Hunters scale trees with makeshift smoker baskets, then descend with dripping combs.

PHOTO (COLOR): BOYS NO MORE Lessons of the lash fall on young backs during the nkumbi, the ritual passage into manhood. For several months Mbuti and Bantu boys, roughly nine to twelve years old, endure daily whippings to toughen them up. Just one of the cultural knots binding Pygmy' hunters and Bantu farmers, the nkumbi begins at the behest of a Bantu chief and starts with a festival and the circumcision of each boy.

PHOTO (COLOR): The forest then becomes both classroom and obstacle course, where silence reigns.

PHOTO (COLOR): Normally chatty boys keep quiet by clamping stick-skewered leaves in their mouths. These trials don't dampen their spirits, says photographer Randy Olson, who noticed that humor often offsets their hardship. "They laugh so hard they have to hold each other up," he says.

PHOTO (COLOR): A human flood chokes the mud-slick remnants of a highway, the main vein for commerce through the Ituri. Rough and rutted during dry weather, the roads are nearly impassable in the wet season. But rain can't stop the toleka traders, who push goods hundreds of miles by bicycle.

PHOTO (COLOR): Mbuti girls seem lost in an alien world during a visit to a market near Beni. When plucked from its forest roots, Pygmy culture crumbles. "Without the forest, the Mbuti become a kind of pauper group," says conservationist Terese Hart. Some Pygmies work for poachers or loggers to survive.

PHOTO (COLOR): LOGGING CAMPS appear like lesions in the Ituri, though pervasive lawlessness and violence have kept big timber companies at bay. For the Ituri, the prospect of peace has a dark side: It could foster more cutting and attract settlers.

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By Paul Salopek

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