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## History of the name Pygmy and its importance for the Pygmies themselves

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**Summary** - Many people and organizations misunderstand the concept behind the name Pygmy. This misunderstanding leads them to misinterpretations and erroneous judgements about its use. This article goes back to the origin of the name in order to clarify the meaning that it has today, especially for the Pygmies themselves. The term 'pygmy' originated in ancient Greece where it was employed for a legendary people who, in Greek mythology, were engaged in an unceasing battle against cranes. Although the morphology of the pygmies described by the ancient Greeks cannot be fully characterized, the term 'pygmy' was used for centuries to refer to a population of small stature living close to the Nile. This led scientists and travellers in modern times to refer to populations of small stature living in equatorial Africa as pygmies. The distinction between Pygmies and non-Pygmies in this region matches the presence of two kinds of populations whose identities are defined in contraposition to one another by socio-cultural aspects. Genetic population studies have suggested that the Pygmies split from non-Pygmy populations around 60,000 years BP. Very importantly, the use of the name Pygmy is gratifying to the Pygmies themselves and it appears in the title of almost all Pygmy rights organizations. The name Pygmy thus covers populations sharing a particular phenotype, having a common origin and thus a biological identity, as well as socio-cultural characteristics which are diverse but nevertheless distinguish them from non-Pygmy populations. Furthermore, the name Pygmy has a dual function for the Pygmies themselves, at once asserting their common identity in contraposition to non-Pygmies ("Big-blacks" as they call them) and conveying their claims against those who despise them, who are the same "Big-blacks".

**Keywords** - Greece, XXI century, ONG, Identity, Claim.

### Introduction

In the history of humankind, there has always been curiosity for peoples who appear to exhibit very particular traits (Dawson 1938), including those whose size places them at the extremes of human diversity: those of very large stature (referred to as giants) and those of small size (referred to as dwarfs and pygmies). The term 'pygmy' in this context has been, and still is, surrounded by an enigmatic aura. Whether from a knowledge of Pygmy groups, or from a lack of knowledge, or even because of doubt about their existence, the term 'pygmy' has always been present in history and accompanied by the most varied images. It exerts an attraction that has remained very lively over the centuries in the

scientific, literary, and artistic fields but also in the collective unconscious of various civilizations. This term, which has remained somewhat ambiguous since its origin in ancient Greece, has seen its content and meaning evolve along with its uses to refer to different beings according to the questions and knowledge of the time. What is remarkable is that despite the many references to pygmies cited by individuals or groups, few travellers were able to provide first-hand evidence of their existence. It was not until the modern era that precise narratives appeared, and it was only in the nineteenth century that explorers/travellers publishing their adventures in unknown lands made the connection between the population they were observing and the pygmies of the ancient Greeks. The significance of the

term 'pygmy', originating more than two thousand years ago in ancient Greece, is still elusive to some despite the efforts of specialists to shed light on its history, meaning and evolution (Janni 1978; Ballabriga 1983; Bahuchet 1993a, 2012).

Today this lack of knowledge about the history and etymology of the term 'pygmy' is accompanied by an ideology developed in the Western world, especially in the English-speaking countries, which is supposed to work in the best interests of other groups, but which is completely disconnected and ignorant of the anthropological reality of these Others whose interests it claims to defend. Worse still, this ideology is supported by activists with whom dialogue is very difficult. Their intolerance and shallow judgments, which recall and revive the darkest hours in the history of humanity, is causing some colleagues to no longer dare use words that are in fact the right words since they are based on facts, answer to a history, and importantly, are recognized by the people concerned. It is therefore not surprising that excellent experts on the study of Pygmies have deleted the term 'pygmy' from their websites.

Clearly, the use of the term 'pygmy' is being questioned by people who are not directly involved in the study of these groups but who are subject to media pressure, especially through social network users who believe that justice can be measured in numbers of tweets. Some associate editors of scientific journals are thus finding themselves in doubt about accepting a manuscript in which the term 'pygmy' is used, even if the same scientific journal has just published another manuscript handled by another associate editor who was not challenged by the use of the word because, certainly and unlike the first editor, the second editor is aware of the socio-cultural foundations (Robillard and Bahuchet 2012; Bahuchet 1993b, 2012) and the genetic evidence (Verdu et al. 2009; Patin et al. 2009) that substantiate the reality of Pygmy existence (see below).

As a result, specialists on Pygmy groups and the very name of Pygmy people are being suppressed in favour of a range of other names that

can only be recognized by researchers with some history in the discipline and capable of making the connections between them to conduct a more holistic reflection on these groups that better corresponds to their biological and socio-cultural identity.

This article returns to the origins of the term 'pygmy' in order to give a state-of-the-art account of its meaning as it has evolved, and to clarify the meaning that the term presents today, especially for the Pygmy people themselves.

## Methodology

As we have said, the term 'pygmy' originated in ancient Greece. To discuss what this term might have meant for ancient Greeks, we used the only four known texts that refer to pygmies, Homer's *Iliad*, the *Historia* of Herodotus and two texts by Aristotle. We used the French translation of L. Bardollet for the *Iliad*, that of A. Bargout for Herodotus and that of J. Barthélemy-Saint Hilaire for the texts of Aristotle. Unlike the *Iliad*, in which just one sentence refers to pygmies, Herodotus compiles earlier texts and narratives, some of which mention pygmies, while Aristotle includes them in his reflections on natural history. We completed the discussion with a commentary on ancient Greek vases representing pygmies.

About the introduction of the term 'pygmy' in modern times, reading the explorations in seventeenth and eighteenth centuries allowed us to identify for the first time that the relationship between the pygmies of the ancient Greeks and the actual accounts of the explorers of equatorial Africa was first established by S. Purchas (1625). This relationship was then taken up by Du Chaillu (1872) and others. For the texts that mention pygmies from the end of the 19th century, we were helped by the bibliography compiled by F. Plisnier-Ladame (1970).

To understand what the term 'pygmy' means to Pygmy groups themselves, the best way would have been to carry out surveys among all these peoples. But unfortunately, political reality makes

this impossible. It is important to remember that many groups of Pygmies live outside the reach of mass media and as a result many do not know the term because the word does not exist in their language. Moreover, their daily activities (as in any other society) are not conducive to awakening their interest in these issues. Only individuals who speak another language and have contact with people from other groups are familiar with the term 'pygmy', or with the term 'twa' in the Bantu languages, which means 'dwarf'. Many Pygmies have become involved in defending their rights vis-à-vis other local groups, and even at national and international level, by forming associations. It is through these associations that we will try to understand the importance of the term 'pygmy' for the Pygmies themselves. If they perceive the term as derogatory towards them, it is to be expected that they will not use it or will ignore it completely. On the other hand, if Pygmy associations defending Pygmy rights use this term to name and recognize themselves, this implies that the name Pygmy unites them and conveys their identity.

### Origin of the term 'pygmy'

In ancient Greek, the word *pygmy* means a cubit, a measure of length whose meaning differs between populations and periods. The cubit in ancient Egypt, which is certainly the one used by the Greeks in ancient times, corresponds approximately to the distance between the elbow and the end of the middle fingertip, about 50 centimetres. Its derivative *pygmaios* means 'distance of one cubit'. It is therefore assumed that the ancient Greeks attributed the term 'pygmy' to a population formed by individuals of small stature.

However, the first mention of a people of small size, but not dwarfs, dates back to the 23<sup>rd</sup> century BC and is found in a letter that the Egyptian pharaoh Pepis II sent to General Herkuf, which is reproduced in the tomb of the latter. During the 23<sup>rd</sup> century BC, Herkuf made several trips to Nubia for commercial and exploratory purposes. From his fourth and last trip, he

brought back a small man, a very good dancer, who was coveted by the pharaoh, Pepis II, who was then about twelve years old. The pharaoh asked Herkuf to bring the small dancer back to him, taking all the necessary care to ensure that he arrived before him in good shape. It is important to note that the word dwarf in hieroglyphs corresponds to *nmi* while the word used in the correspondence is *dnq*, which Dawson (1938) identifies with the word pygmy. This first 'narrative' mentioning what could have been a Pygmy is accompanied by numerous representations, especially in bas-relief, throughout Egypt in the time of the Pharaohs.

It is important to note that in ancient Greece, the term 'pygmy' referred to a very particular population, not only for the size of its individuals but also, even more importantly, because this was a legendary people said to be engaged in an unceasing battle against cranes (known as *geranomachy*), as frequently recounted and illustrated in texts and images. In ancient texts, the way these pygmies are described is actually very approximate. The first mention of a pygmy people is found in Homer's Iliad, III, 3-6, which was most likely written around the eighth century BC and narrates earlier events. Homer compares the cries of the Trojans to the whooping of the cranes as they flew down to fight the *pygmaioisi*, bringing them destruction and death. Later, Herodotus (5<sup>th</sup> century BC) in his History, also mentions pygmies in his description of the visit of Cambyse (son of Cyrus) to Memphis (III, 37). Cambyse entered the temple of Hephaestus and repeatedly insulted the statue of this god, who resembled him, by calling it a Patek, a statue that the Phoenicians placed as a figurehead on their triremes. Herodotus specifies that the Pateks resemble the pygmies. Herodotus does not mention pygmies again, but in Part II, 32 of his History, he summarizes an adventure that happened to a group of Nasamons, people who inhabited the Sirte region of Libya and whose oral histories have been related by several people. Herodotus writes that this group of Nasamons ventured towards the interior of the continent to explore the lands beyond the inhabited regions.

After crossing various regions, including the desert, they arrived on a plain with trees. While they were eating, they were taken prisoner by a group of small men of a “size below average” (*μετρίων ἐλάσσονας ἀνδρῶν*). The Nasamons were brought to a village, near a river, where all the people were similar, black and small. This text is interesting in two respects. First, Herodotus speaks of a population of individuals of small size and not of pygmies. If the term ‘pygmy’ was synonymous with small people, one would expect Herodotus to use that term in this narrative. Then, in the same text, the story of the Nasamons refers to a river that according to Erearque, the king who recounted this adventure to Herodotus (History II, 33), is the Nile. Herodotus agrees. This text is therefore the first to mention the presence of a small people near the Nile. Herodotus (History IV, 43) again fails to use the term ‘pygmy’ when he mentions the existence of small men (*ἀνθρώπους μικροῦς*) who lived on the African coasts of the Atlantic Ocean, which he had heard of from the narrative of Sataspes. The Persian Sataspes, who was sentenced to death, had his sentence commuted to embark on a tour of Libya (Africa). After passing the Pillars of Hercules (Strait of Gibraltar), he sailed southwards for several months. On the most remote coasts he was able to reach, he saw a group of little men dressed in palm leaves who ran away when he and his crew landed.

A century later, Aristotle refers to pygmies in his ‘History of Animals’, VIII, 14 and in his work ‘Of the Generation of Animals’, II, 8. In the former, Aristotle seems to emphasize the fact that these pygmies are a very real “race of men”, composed of small individuals living near the Nile and who fought against cranes. He also talks about dwarves (History of Animals, VI, 24), comparing them to the small, stocky Bidet horse breed and to the runt of a litter of piglets, referring to disease during gestation. A similar comparison is found in “Of the Generation of Animals”, but in this case Aristotle refers to pygmies whose stunted body parts and small size he thought resulted from an accident during gestation.

While the reference to the small size of pygmies is found only in Aristotle, Herodotus speaks of pygmies and of men of small size but does not mention the term dwarf. A certain deformity is attributed to pygmies and dwarfs by Aristotle, while Herodotus, although he does not mention this directly, compares pygmies to Pateks. The Pateks were grotesque dwarf gods of the Phoenicians and were represented as such as figureheads on their boats, so that traders spread their images around the Mediterranean. The Phoenician Pateks seem to derive from the god Ptah of ancient Egypt (Monceaux 1891), who served as a model for the Greek god Hephaestus (Ballabriga 1981). Ptah and Hephaestus are represented as deformed dwarfs with a large head, prominent belly, short arms and flexed legs. Thus, the comparison that Herodotus makes (Pygmy-Patek) concurs with the explanation advanced by Aristotle. The texts of Herodotus and Aristotle therefore seem to suggest that pygmies were characterized by a certain physical deformity. For Aristotle, the geographical area where these pygmies lived seems to be close to the Nile, while for Herodotus, the banks of the Nile were inhabited by men with a shorter than average stature. Taking all these texts into account leaves an ambiguous image of pygmies in ancient Greece. They are indeed small, but if they inhabited the banks of the Nile, the ‘deformity’ according to Herodotus would have simply corresponded to the smallness of their size.

Since the earliest representations, the oldest being probably one on a Cypriot vase of the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC (Karageorghis 1972; Dasen 1988, 1990; Holtzmann and Pasquier 1998), representations of Pygmies have varied greatly from one artist to the next. This artistic freedom accounts for the lack of detail concerning their morphology. Although representations of pygmies in their fight against cranes vary, the men fighting the cranes, although small, are often portrayed as athletes. These men are clearly Pygmies and their representation conveys an ideal of the physical body of the ancients.

Use of the term ‘pygmy’ to refer to a particular people is therefore anchored both geographically

and temporally in Ancient Greece. This is very important because the resumption of the term 'pygmy' in the nineteenth century is based on references to texts of this period.

### The term 'pygmy' in modern times

Ballabriga (1981) and Bahuchet (1993a) have analyzed texts referring to pygmies in other parts of the world, including India (e.g. Megasthenes, *Indica*, IV BJC), as well as interpretations given to the term 'pygmy' by authors of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the term 'pygmies', meaning a small people living near the (sources of) the Nile, was widespread among scholars, although the reality was not always proven. At this time, non-Hispanic subjects were starting to compile accounts of journeys (e.g. de Bry, Hakluyt). Samuel Purchas, a British cleric interested in geography, began a new collection of journey accounts in which he intended to include unpublished stories. Purchas met several English sailors who had sailed across every region of the globe and who had sometimes stayed in Africa. One of them was Andrew Battell. Purchas and Battell both lived in Leigh, Essex, making it easier for Purchas to visit Battell to collect his memories. At the end of the sixteenth century, Battell had embarked on an English ship under the command of Abraham Cocke to sail to Brazil, where the captain, like many of His Majesty's sailors, would attack and chase Hispanic ships loaded with goods and treasures from the Rio de la Plata to Spain, then under Philip II, King of Spain and Portugal. Putting in for supplies on one of the many islands along the Brazilian coast, Battell and four other sailors were taken prisoner and brought to Rio de Janeiro. After four months, Battell was taken by a Portuguese ship to Saint Paul de Luanda (now the capital of Angola) where his stay in Africa began. After his release around 1603, Battell was unable to return to Europe and settled for three years in Loango, further north, from where he travelled along the coastal zone and into the interior to

the south of present-day Gabon. Further east, in the upper Ngonga, Battell located the kingdom of Kesock, in the north-eastern extremity of which he could have met Pygmies. He does indeed tell of a type of small people, the size of twelve-year-old children, who ate only animals that they killed in the forest with their arrows and darts. He mentions in particular the gorilla hunt, for which a man would leave alone with his poisoned arrows. These little people would never enter the houses of other groups, and if anyone should pass by their house, they would abandon it and settle elsewhere. They paid tribute to the king of Kesock by bringing him the tusks and tail of an elephant. Purchas (1613) published the adventures that Battell recounted to him, but Battell's own notes were not published until later, after his death, also by Purchas (1625), and were reissued by Ravenstein in 1901. Except for Purchas's books, there is no record of Battell's life: even the name of Battell no longer existed in the village of Leigh in Essex at the time of publication of Ravenstein's study. There is a very interesting detail in Battell's account published in the 1625 compilation by Purchas, which is at the heart and origin of the connection made between the pygmies of the ancients and groups of small stature in equatorial Africa. Charles Walkenaer (1771-1852), a French scientist who was the curator of the map department of the Royal Library and said to be the discoverer of the portolan chart of Juan de la Cosa, recounts, in his compilation of travels (only the 21 volumes concerning Africa were published between 1826 and 1831), the adventures of Battell (this is not a French edition of this narrative) and mentions that Battell had discovered "a nation of pygmies" (Vol. 13, p. 441). Given that at the beginning of the nineteenth century, pygmies tended to be considered as a mythical people, it is very unlikely that Walkenaer would lend a term that designated only imaginary beings to the adventurer: Walkenaer must have read the word "pygmy" somewhere in Battell's story. However, Battell never uses the word, talking instead about "a kind of little people called Matimbas." The author talking about "pygmies" is Purchas. In the

note that Purchas added to Battell's text about chimpanzees, he introduced the word "pygmy" to refer to "the type of little people" who hunted gorillas. So, Battell seems to be the first European of the Modern era to have met the Pygmies, but Purchas is the first to have used the Greek term to refer to the small-sized peoples of the African equatorial forest.

Real knowledge of the existence of Pygmies began to crystallize in the second half of the XIX century. Paul Belloni Du Chaillu, a Franco-Belgian-American explorer who spent many years in Gabon with his father in his youth - which enabled him to speak several local languages - made three inland journeys between 1855 and 1865. The main purpose of his travels was to hunt gorillas, whose existence had just been confirmed. One of the first explorers to mention the gorilla specifically was Andrew Battell. The transcription by Du Chaillu of a passage from Battell's account of the gorilla suggests that he was very familiar with Battell's text and therefore certainly with his observations on peoples of small stature.

During his third and final voyage, undertaken between 1863 and 1865, [Du Chaillu \(1867\)](#) went up the N'Gounié River and headed east through the Crystal Mountains. On his way, he was told by the Ishogo (Tsogo) that there were villages whose people were of small stature. Once in the territory of the Ashangos (Sangu), in the locality of Niembouai, he was offered the opportunity to visit one of these villages. Each time Du Chaillu arrived at one of the villages, its occupants abandoned it: sometimes he managed to see them but they were difficult to approach. He described their small huts made with branches. When he entered one of these huts, he saw people hidden inside. By pulling them by the legs, he managed to get them out. He tried to persuade them of his good intentions because they were utterly terrified. Du Chaillu visited them several times afterwards, but could only make limited contact with one old woman who could not run away. This happened in June 1865. Although at the beginning of his text, Du Chaillu refers to individuals as being of small

stature and sometimes uses the term 'dwarf', he immediately went on to call them by their own name of Obongo (Bongo). These two terms, dwarfs and Obongo, were used to locate these peoples on the map that accompanies the volume of his narratives. Du Chaillu was therefore the first European to have contacted the Pygmies, but he did not use the term in this volume and made no connection between this people and the pygmies of the ancients. In 1872, he published a book entitled "In the country of the dwarfs" ([Du Chaillu 1872](#)), in which he narrated the same journey in a more romantic style, with an emphasis, as the title suggests, on his meeting with these people of small stature. In this book, he again used the term 'dwarf' and called them, of course, by their own name of Obongo, but he mentioned several times that this people of dwarfs (or sometimes pygmies) was the same as that of the ancients, mentioning the texts of Herodotus and Homer, "now I do see the Dwarfs of Equatorial Africa - the Dwarfs of Homer, Herodotus - the Dwarfs of the ancients" (p. 249). So Paul Du Chaillu once more connects the small people of equatorial Africa with the pygmies of the ancient Greeks.

During the same period, Georg August Schweinfurt, a German botanist, travelled the Upper Nile, between 1868 and 1871. On his way up the river, he heard the Nubians accompanying him telling stories about dwarf peoples, their elephant hunts and their physical characteristics. But it was only in the kingdom of Mombuttus (Mangbetu) in the north-east of the present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), that he saw individuals of this type for the first time. Schweinfurt knew the accounts of Herodotus and Aristotle on the peoples of small stature but he took especial note of the accounts of Aristotle, because he had called them pygmies and mentioned that they lived near the sources of the Nile. As Schweinfurt was close to the sources of the Nile, he thought it quite logical to give the name of Pygmies to the small people he was meeting in equatorial Africa ([Schweinfurt 1874](#)). Schweinfurt saw a couple of Akka pygmies (the name they gave

themselves) for the first time when the king of the Mangbetu, Mounza, sent them to take a dog from the German explorer. Schweinfurt was quite surprised and from that day (March–April 1870), he made constant efforts to see and find out a little more about the Akka. Schweinfurt could only study six individuals and, with the exception of his first encounter, he never saw any women. One day, he met an army of Akka archers on duty for a Mounza subject king. But all these meetings were sporadic and did not allow him to spend time to observe and study these individuals, which he regretted enormously afterwards once he had left the country. However, from Mounza he received an Akka in exchange for a dog, intending to bring him back to Europe. But the Akka died on the way after spending 18 months with Schweinfurt.

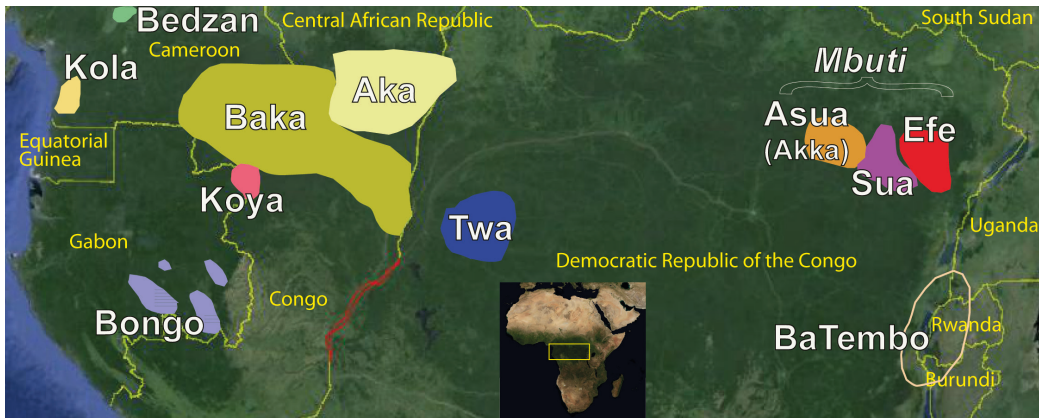
After Du Chaillu in the west of Equatorial Africa and Schweinfurt in the east, European contacts with the Pygmies became continuous. On the coast of Gabon, the ship *L'Africain* delivered slaves captured in Cape Lopez, among whom was a Pygmy of the Akoa group who was taken on board his ship by [Capitan Fleuriot de Langle](#) (1876). The explorers were gradually supplanted by scientific expeditions with better planning and the financial and moral support of learned societies. These expeditions sought to map the broad geography of the African continent. Between 1873 and 1876, *Die Deutsch Expedition an der Loango-küste* explored northern Angola and southern Congo, led by the anthropologist Adolf Bastian, ex-president of the Berlin Geographical Society. The members of the expedition, including J. Falkenstein, met and studied the Obongo (Bongo) pygmies, the same group as Du Chaillu had met a few years earlier. Images of the Bongo did not appear in the work of [Bastian](#) (1874–1875) but two years earlier, in a single plate illustrating Falkenstein's article published in the *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* (1874), which may indicate a desire for recognition, if not as the first but as one of the first to make the Pygmy peoples known. Although Schweinfurt's book was published in the same year, Falkenstein's plate is already very different to the images of Du

Chaillu or Schweinfurt, which represent or evoke action; here the Pygmy is static, the individual appears in a style that prefigures the academic representations of the early twentieth century. Published in an anthropological journal, the image, and henceforth the subject, was clearly intended for men of science rather than the general public.

### The early 20<sup>th</sup> century

In addition to the work of researchers seeking to characterize and understand Pygmy groups, images showing Pygmies began to appear in books and periodicals with the expansion of photography. However, it was not easy to travel around Africa on foot with the heavy equipment that photography required: it was much easier to undertake photo shoots in the studio. Similarly to what happened with other ethnic groups, some Pygmies were then brought back to Europe and the United States, but this time successfully, unlike Schweinfurt's attempt. Some were brought back to be exhibited in fairs, the best known case being the Pygmy Ota Benga, or to be educated and to some extent adopted, such as the Pygmies sent by the Italian Miani and taken on by the Conde Miniscalchi in the 1870s, or to be shown and walked about in public or less public places purely to enhance the prestige of whoever brought them to Europe. Among the latter, Colonel James Harrison is undoubtedly the most notable ([Anonymous 1905](#); [Green 1995, 1998](#)). Harrison, a retired army colonel and habitual hunter in Africa, managed to persuade six Pygmies from Ituri (north-east RDC) to follow him to England. After a few weeks in Cairo where they were examined, they arrived in London on 1 June 1905 aboard the ship *Orestes*. They would stay in England for almost three years. During this time, they toured England, Scotland, Wales and also travelled to Berlin. Their activities can be followed day to day as all the newspapers reported on their visit. They were received at Parliament in Westminster, they took part in





**Fig. 1- Geographical distribution of Pygmy groups in Equatorial Africa.** Many other names have been attributed to these groups, sometimes corresponding to the union of two groups (e.g. Babinga for Baka and Aka) and sometimes to sub-groups (e.g. Benjellé, the westernmost sub-group of the Aka [Sarno 1993]).

the birthday celebrations of Princess Victoria at Buckingham Palace, they recorded the first disc of African music ever made in the United Kingdom and were received in the studio of W. & D. Downey, photographers to the Royal Family. On 17 November 1907, the six Pygmies boarded the ship Hindoo in the port of Hull to return to Africa. The last chapter of this particular adventure is unknown to historians who followed the Pygmies' tour in England because it is found in a book by the Polish explorer Jan Czekanowski (1958). Czekanowski was part of the Duke of Mecklenburg's expedition that explored East Africa between 1907 and 1908. While Czekanowski made a long stop at Fort Portal (Uganda), Harrison arrived with the six Pygmies on the return trip to Ituri. Harrison's appearance according to Czekanowski was pathetic. He described him as a "shipwrecked veteran" whose "caravan was miserable and the condition of its porters distressing". Once the six Pygmies felt they were approaching their country, they tore off their clothes and fled from the caravan, which shows, according to Czekanowski, that they were not at all attached to Harrison and that they were not grateful to have been presented to the court of England.

## The Pygmies

The term 'pygmy' acquired a precise and rich meaning during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries thanks to the studies of numerous specialists from various disciplines. Some authors misuse the term 'pygmy' by assigning it as a name to any group of individuals of small size from any part of the globe. However, for many reasons, it needs to be restricted to African groups living near the Equator. However, the name Pygmy does not refer only to groups whose average stature is less than 155 cm (Cavalli-Sforza 1986); its meaning is broader since it refers to semi-nomadic groups with a small average adult size who inhabit the African equatorial forest, although some groups live in the savannah. Pygmy groups have a subsistence economy based mainly on hunting and gathering, but also, depending on the group, on fishing, crafts and agriculture. Pygmy groups speak different languages and have varied socio-cultural lifestyles. Thus, the name Pygmy in fact covers ethnic groups that differ in many respects (Robillard and Bahuchet 2012). All Pygmy groups, however, have the same kind of relationship with non-Pygmy groups, or "Big-blacks" as the Pygmies call them. In other words,



**Fig. 2** - A group of Baka Pygmies in a camp near Le Bosquet in south-east Cameroon. The Baka love to stay in the camps deep in the forest, in their own environment and far from the areas under the influence of the "Big-blacks". The entrance to the mongulu is concealed by a raffia palm leaf, which recalls the description given by Du Chaillu, still valid today: "little branches of trees had been stuck up in front to show that the inmates were out, and that their doors were shut, and that nobody could get in" (*In the country of the dwarfs 1872*, p. 254).

what identifies the Pygmies from a socio-cultural perspective is their confrontational interaction with other groups (Bahuchet 1993b, 2012). Therefore, the term 'pygmy' has a strong socio-cultural meaning. Who is a Pygmy and who is not is quickly identified by the individuals (Pygmies and non-Pygmies) who inhabit equatorial Africa.

The Pygmies can be divided into two groups, those living in the east and those in the west of equatorial Africa (around 5° LN to 5° LS) (Fig. 1). The eastern Pygmies include the Asua, Efe and Sua groups (all three sometimes called Mbuti) who live in the Ituri area in the east of the DRC. They also include the BaTembo group in the lake zone on the border with Rwanda. The western Pygmies include the Baka (Fig. 2), Bedzan, Aka, Kola, Bongo, Koya and Twa (Tumba lake) in Cameroon, Gabon, Congo, Central African Republic and the west of the DRC. Research on population genetics has suggested that Pygmy groups share a common origin and that they split from non-Pygmy African groups approximately 60,000 years BP (95% confidence interval (CI): 23,025-123,275 [Verdu et al. 2009], 25,8-130,5 [Patin et al. 2009]). These findings are very important, because if all Pygmy groups share a

common origin, they imply that the term 'pygmy' in this context refers to a biological entity.

These same studies on population genetics have suggested that the Pygmies split into the eastern and western groups about 22,000 years BP (95% CI: 14,2-66,3), and that the western groups became differentiated circa 2,800 years BP (95% CI: 725-34,275 years BP). Pygmy morphology has a genetic basis (Verdu et al. 2009; Becker et al. 2011, 2012; Pemberton et al. 2018) and the differences among Pygmy groups may be due to various gene flows from non-Pygmy populations (Destro-Bisol et al. 2004; Patin et al. 2009; Verdu et al. 2009; Tishkoff et al. 2009). The processes responsible for their small size differ between the eastern and western groups. The Pygmies from Ituri are small in size at birth, indicating that their adult stature is the result of prenatal growth factors (Bailey 1991). On the other hand, the small adult size of the Baka Pygmies in the West results from altered growth factors during early childhood, between birth and 3 years of age (Ramirez Rozzi et al. 2015). The Pygmy phenotype was thus acquired independently in the east and the west, certainly after the east-west separation and most likely around 12000-8000 years ago. This indicates that the

Pygmy phenotype in the east and west of equatorial Africa is the result of an evolutionary convergence: this reinforces the idea that the Pygmy phenotype is an adaptation to life in the forest, although for the moment, the benefits that this morphology might bring, especially in terms of thermodynamics, are still speculative.

The term 'pygmy' was established, introduced and used by Westerners to refer to groups with diverse but particular morphological, genetic and socio-cultural characteristics, but it is remarkable that the distinction between Pygmy and non-Pygmy exactly matches the socio-cultural distinction between two types of populations within equatorial Africa. The Pygmies and non-Pygmies are groups whose identity is defined in relation to each other and which present particular, complex and very diverse interrelationships that have remained stable despite recent economic and demographic changes (e.g. [Robillard and Bahuchet 2012](#); [Soengas 2012](#)). A major feature of the relationship between the Pygmies and non-Pygmies is the contempt of the latter towards the former. The "Big-blacks" show disdain towards the Pygmies at every level. This discrimination is mainly in the form of negative stereotyping, segregation and denial of rights ([Lewis 2000](#)). Pygmy groups are still associated with "Big-black" villages and it is usual to hear the village chief talk about "his" Pygmies. Sometimes the Pygmies have a chief of their own but despite this, they are still subject to the neighbouring "Big-black" group. "Big-blacks" do not consider the Pygmies to be fully human and they therefore exploit them, make them work in their fields or as clandestine loggers in difficult, sometimes inhuman, conditions for minimal remuneration ([Bobo Bobo 2019](#)). The Pygmies cannot move freely because in certain areas, such as near forest tracks or certain villages and towns, they are unwelcome and may be beaten, which forces them to conceal their Pygmy identity as far as possible ([Bacirongo and Nest 2015](#)). At the state level, their land and civil rights are not recognized and their access to justice is limited or non-existent ([Gilbert 2019](#); [Bobo Bobo 2019](#); [Yebega Ayissi 2019](#); [Kulesza and Robillard 2019](#)).

To "Big-blacks", the Pygmies are, at best, barely more than chimpanzees: some have even asked researchers to analyze Pygmy blood in laboratories to see if they are really humans ([Maget 2013](#)).

### The term 'pygmy' today

The disdain of the "Big-blacks" towards the Pygmies has led some people and NGOs to propose a ban on the term 'pygmy'. Some Westerners, almost exclusively from English speaking countries, see the "Pygmies/Big-blacks" dichotomy as a reason to eliminate the term 'pygmy', thereby trying to impose ideas forged in some Western countries on people whose reality is far removed from quarrels specific to the English speaking world. Thus, the term 'pygmy' was banned in the Republic of Congo in 2011 (Law 5-2011, Official Journal of the Republic of Congo, 3 March 2011, pp. 315), despite the fact that, as we said above, in equatorial Africa people immediately recognize who is a Pygmy and who is not. So, to distinguish them from "Big-blacks", other terms have been proposed by those who oppose the use of the term 'pygmy', but these terms are each more imprecise than the next (e.g. twa, hunter-gatherer, native) or even absurd (e.g. BBBB) (see [Robillard Bahuchet 2012](#); [Verdu 2019](#)). All these reflections and decisions about the term 'pygmy' are being made a long way from the reality on the ground and they rarely, if ever, consider the will and sovereignty of the Pygmies themselves.

The term 'pygmy' appears regularly in the African press and in the titles of documentaries and books (e.g. [Barret et al. 2012](#); [Maget 2013](#)). Being a Pygmy is a source of pride for the Baka with whom I worked during fourteen years of research ([Ramirez Rozzi 2021](#)). Input from other Pygmies confirms this personal experience. For instance, [Bacirongo and Nest \(2015\)](#), in the title of their book "Still a Pygmy", clearly show the pride in the identity and the struggle for recognition as a people that underlies the term 'pygmy'. Bacirongo, a Pygmy of the BaTembo group, helped to establish the first Pygmy rights organisation in 1996 in the DRC

(*Action d'Appui Pour la Promotion des Droits de Minorités Autochtones en Afrique Centrale - APDMAC*), whose main goal is "to help and support Pygmy and Pygmoid people stand up for their rights" (p. 133). Other organizations aiming to defend the rights of the Pygmies have since appeared in other equatorial African countries. It is highly noteworthy that most of these organizations acting in favour of Pygmy rights use the word Pygmy in their name. Examples are the CAMV (*Centre d'Accompagnement des Autochtones Pygmées et Minoritaires Vulnérables*), FAAP (*Fédération Africaine des Autochtones Pygmées*), LINAPYCO (*Ligue Nationale des Associations Autochtones Pygmées de la RD Congo*), FOCAPYG (*Fondation camerounaise pour la promotion des Pygmées*), CIDOPY (*Centre d'information et de documentation pygmées*), OSAPY (*Organisation d'Accompagnement et d'Appui aux Pygmées*), DYCEPAUP (*Dynamique communautaire pour l'émancipation des peuples autochtones pygmées*), DP (*Dignité Pygmée*), PIDP-KIVU (*Programme d'Intégration et de Développement du peuple Pygmées au Kivu*), GLODEPM (*Global Development For Pygmy Minorities*), RAPHY (*Réseau des Associations Autochtones Pygmées de la RDC*), ADCPPG (*Association pour le développement de la culture des peuples pygmées du Gabon*), MINAPYGA (*Mouvement des minorités autochtones, indigènes et pygmées du Gabon*), *Un Monde Pygmée*. (see GITPA, *Groupe International de Travail pour les Peuples Autochtones*, [www.gitpa.org](http://www.gitpa.org)).

Moreover, some of these organizations are campaigning not for a ban on the term 'pygmy' but, on the contrary, for its introduction into the texts of laws. These include the DGPA association (*Dynamique des peuples autochtones pygmées*) with its demand, together with the REPALEF (*Réseau des Populations Autochtones et Locales pour la Gestion des écosystèmes forestiers de la RDC*), "to adopt and promulgate urgently the law on the protection of the rights of the Pygmies", under parliamentary debate in the DRC in 2021. The term 'pygmy' is thus not only widely used by the Pygmies themselves, but used by them as a banner for their identity and claims for their rights.

## Conclusion

The term 'pygmy', which originated in ancient Greece, is more topical than ever. The term 'pygmy' is the only one that allows us to designate specific populations who have different names and languages but share a common genetic history and socio-cultural characteristics that distinguish them from other groups inhabiting the same geographical region. Outside anthropological circles where the ethnic names are known, the term 'pygmy' is immediately recognisable to a wide audience. Very importantly, the term 'pygmy' names these people in the way they name themselves and they see its use as gratifying (Lewis 2000) – a fact that led A. Epelboin (2012) to coin the word *pygmitude*, meaning pride in being a Pygmy. Abandoning the term purely to salve the consciences of deskbound technocrats would only contribute to a denial of the existence of groups who actually use the term 'pygmy' as a banner in their fight to have their identity recognized and their rights respected. The term 'pygmy' thus has a dual function for the Pygmies themselves, giving them a common identity in contraposition to the "Big-blacks" and conveying their claims against those who despise them, who are those same "Big-blacks".

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