

Brief History and Current Situation of Indigenous Peoples of the Great Lakes Region of Africa

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Brief history of indigenous people of the Great Lakes region of Africa

- ▶ The Great Lakes region is made up of three countries: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda.
- ▶ The indigenous peoples of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Rwanda share almost the same lifestyles. They lived on hunting, fishing and gathering.
- ▶ Apart from the name of the indigenous peoples, other terms have sometimes been used to designate them, such as aboriginal, « first peoples », « root people », « first nation » or « native people », succeeding the pejorative « primitive people », but all officially abandoned for the benefit of indigenous people.
- ▶ In each country, the indigenous people of the region have different names.
- ▶ In Burundi, as in Rwanda, they are called BATWA, the BASANGWABUTAKA (the first occupants) and in the DRC as Batwa, Bambuti and Pygmies.

Brief history of indigenous people of the Great Lakes region of Africa

- ▶ For hundreds of years, like most Pygmy peoples, the Twa lived in the equatorial forest according to a traditional way of life of semi-nomadic hunter-gatherers.
 - ▶ Their societies were marked by a very strong sense of equality (linked to the moral principle of non-reciprocal sharing), including relations between men and women.
 - ▶ Their societies were also based on a system of immediate return consumption, in which there is no storage, as opposed to delayed-return societies, which store surplus in anticipation of potential shortages.
- ▶ The first peoples, the Twa, had to undergo, at least from the 14th century AD, the domination of farming and herding peoples, then, from the end of the 19th century, that of European colonisers.
 - ▶ The impact of these newcomers on the lifestyle of the Twa has, however, varied by country and region.
 - ▶ While traditional historiography generally describes a continuous process of marginalisation of the Twa, oral traditions often reflect a picture of a much more contrasted situation, at least until the 21st century.

Current situation of the indigenous peoples of the African Great Lakes region

- ▶ Although the Batwa live from hunting and gathering, currently the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region cannot hunt because of intensive farming and pastoral activities which cover the majority of the country. Hunting has become illegal.
- ▶ From the 1990s to the present day, the Batwa have been trying, with the help of outside organisations, and sometimes local governments, to organise themselves in association in order to obtain recognition of their rights, in particular through better access to education, to land, and to the defence of their traditional forests.
- ▶ Forcibly evicted from their lands without preparation or compensation, the Batwa have needed to adapt to a new way of life that is difficult for the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes region of Africa, due to various problems such as lack of arable land, lack of revenue, lack of jobs, lack of laws to protect them, etc.



Current situation of the indigenous peoples of the African Great Lakes region

- ▶ Moreover, until now, Twa associations and aid programs have remained almost exclusively focused on modernisation and assimilation measures for Twa populations.
- ▶ No pressure is put on national parks organisations and authorities to further respect the land rights of the forest Twa.



Discrimination against the Batwa of the African Great Lakes region

- ▶ Discrimination against the Batwa takes three main forms:
 - ▶ negative stereotypes,
 - ▶ segregation and
 - ▶ denial of rights.
- ▶ In defiance of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, these types of discrimination against indigenous peoples are common and a serious problem in a number of African countries.
- ▶ Hunter-gatherers and former hunter-gatherers are among those who suffer the most severe types of ethnic discrimination in Africa today – mostly tiny minorities who are recognised by themselves and their neighbours as the true indigenous population, descendants of the first inhabitants of the zones which they occupy.
- ▶ In contrast to popular local viewpoints, comparative studies show that discrimination is very serious and very damaging when hunter-gatherers have lost almost every opportunity to live off hunting and gathering, and to a large extent, adopted the lifestyle of their neighbours.
- ▶ Discrimination is much more of a problem in the countryside than in the city and is mainly the work of local people, including local officials.

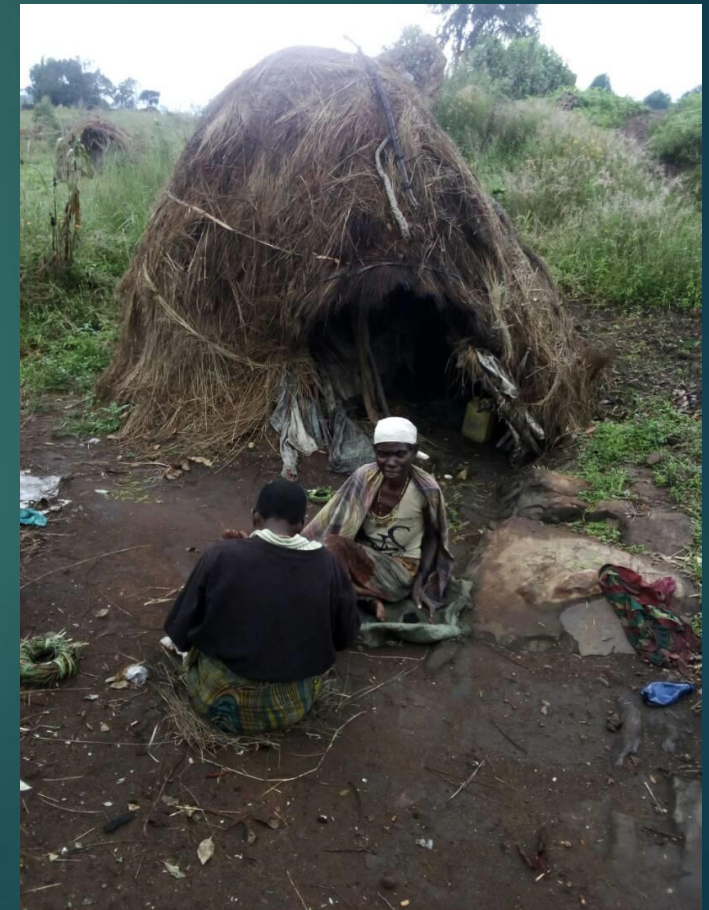
Social discrimination

- ▶ The Batwa are despised but also feared.
 - ▶ They are quite commonly considered subhuman, people who are like animals whose sexuality is not limited by cultural prohibitions; people who, like insatiable animals, feed on disgusting and taboo foods; who are incapable of feeling the slightest shame or decency; people who are capable of anything.
 - ▶ They are only good for dirty and tedious jobs and are identifiable by their attitude and their small size whether there is or is not any prohibition on the use of ethnic labels, and in defiance of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, these offensive stereotypes are explicit and formulated publicly in the attitude of people towards the Batwa.
- ▶ What is unfortunate is that the governments of the region do not take these cases into account and do not enforce laws protecting indigenous people.



No access to land

- ▶ The expulsion of the Batwa from the forests that are their ancestral lands takes place as a result of collusion between international donor agencies, national governments and local officials when creating national parks in which the interests of wildlife take precedence over the interests of the traditional Batwa owners of the land.
- ▶ Many of the Batwa are tenants of private farms. As farmer facilities grow and the demand for land intensifies, tenant-occupied areas are recovered to provide for the needs of landowners' families.
- ▶ Batwa tenants are systematically the first to be evicted. The Batwa often feel it is an injustice, especially when they have been living there for many years. Many refuse to leave, causing conflicts in which the probability of success leans heavily against them.



No access to land

- ▶ For those with land, it is infertile and stony. No activity is practical on these lands, where the Batwa are starving and others are begging and stealing for food.
- ▶ Discrimination is related to their way of life (hunting and gathering) which is not a legitimate use of the land and does not confer rights to its continued occupation.
 - ▶ This contrasts with the widely held view that agriculture, and sometimes also livestock farming, is a legitimate use of land for which occupiers can claim exclusive rights and cannot be dispossessed illegally and without compensation.
 - ▶ Hence the need for a special Batwa policy to ensure the effective protection of their rights of property and possession.



Habitation of a Twa family from Gitega province in Burundi on stony ground (taken by Yves M.)

No access to justice

- ▶ Recognising that all States in the region are parties to the African Charter, many Batwa are unable to fully enjoy their right to equality before the law, to a fair and impartial public trial, to an effective remedy in the courts, to be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and to be protected from interference or arbitrary attacks.
- ▶ For example, the Burundian constitution provides for 50% Hutu and 50% Tutsi employment, without taking into account the third ethnic group of the Batwa.
- ▶ In all countries, Batwa say they have been threatened by those who violate their rights by referring to the lack of official status.

No access to the means of existence

- ▶ In Burundi, more than 90% of the population live off agriculture. As the Batwa do not have arable land, they resort to pottery, a trade that has no value because 98% of Burundians do not use pots made by Batwa.
- ▶ Many Batwa are starving and the government is doing nothing to intervene in this community on the verge of disappearing.



Example: the site of Ruganirwa

- ▶ In the province of MUYINGA, MUYINGA Commune, CUMBA Zone there is a site RUGANIRWA where 424 families live, according to the UPARED 2017 report.
- ▶ In the first week of April 2018, five Batwa died of starvation in three families. Death figures may increase from day to day if nothing is done urgently.
- ▶ UPARED is seeking help but has not yet found a benefactor who can intervene.



Family of 4 at the Ruganirwa site in front of their home (taken by an UPARED member)



Two Batwa families of 11 people after the manufacture of the braziers and the lack of people who can buy them. Same site in Ruganirwa (taken by an UPARED member)

Recommendations:

For governments

- ▶ Integrate the indigenous (Batwa) in the fundamental laws such as constitutions in order to recognise them as full citizens to ensure their participation in decision-making
- ▶ Put in place a policy of combatting discrimination and marginalisation
- ▶ Grant fertile lands to the Batwa
- ▶ Intervene rapidly to ensure food security for the Batwa who are dying of hunger in Burundi
- ▶ Ratify ILO convention 169
- ▶ Implement agrarian policy to guarantee the Batwa fertile land
- ▶ Create national sectoral programs in key sectors such as land, education and employment to enable the Batwa to enjoy fundamental rights and freedoms
- ▶ Ensure the special protection of the Batwa during political and armed conflicts.

Recommendations:

For the international community

- ▶ Support the efforts of indigenous organisations in the Great Lakes region to work with governments and develop legal instruments and constitutional mechanisms to recognise, monitor and uphold the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples (Batwa/Bambuti), including the right to land, in accordance with international instruments on the rights of indigenous peoples;
- ▶ Closely monitor the situation of indigenous peoples (Batwa/Bambuti) in the region who risk becoming easy targets for violence in armed conflicts.



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