

På Upptäcksfärd bland Kongos Dvärgfolk

Efr. Andersson

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This is an old book I discovered in my bookshelf. Not a surprise, I recall the cover from my childhood, I may even have looked at the few blurry photos inside it as a child. I open it and find that it was given to my father for a Christmas present back in 1942. I wonder how interested he was in this missionary tale appropriately published by the 'Svenska Missionsförbundet'¹. One opens such an old and obscure book expecting not so much information about the ostensible subject matter, as an insight in how that was treated seventy years ago.

Efraim Andersson, the author of the book was a missionary, born in 1896, active in the Congo area in the 30's and 40's, and living until 1989. I gather from the book that he might have been more in love with anthropology than missionary work, although I guess he did the latter dutifully. Traditionally if you wanted to be an explorer and anthropologist, the most convenient way was to become a missionary. Missions were legion until the early sixties, except for the Catholic Church and their self-effacing nuns, the spreading of the Gospel fell out of fashion in the early sixties. I went to Sunday School in my childhood, given by missionaries to India. I found it fascinating. Nowadays, missionary work is seen as cultural imperialism, forgetting that modern assistance and the preaching of the blessings of representative democracy and liberal market economy, is just as much of imperialistic busy-bodiness.

The author is fascinated by the 'Babongos'. This is a pygme people, living close to Bantu people, and in fact dominated by the latter, and for all intents and purposes held as their slaves. The Babongos, are not Negroes, for one thing their features are different, and rather than being black their skin is a ditty yellow. They are obviously mixed with the neighboring population and their culture has been strongly influenced by the outside. Traditionally their life is very primitive, their huts are simple constructions, their tools poor, their possessions few. They hunt and gather. There is some speculation that they in the past were skilled hunters of large game, such as elephants, nowadays they are lucky if they can catch an antelope. The author fears that they will go extinct in a few decades, unless they adjust to the agricultural habits of their neighbors. Checking Wikipedia I learn that they still exist, but have abandon their traditional ways of making a meagre living.

The author is interested in their societies, finding out that inheritance goes by the maternal descent, although some features, as their totems, are inherited by their fathers. They get married after puberty, and pre-marital, to say nothing about extra-marital relations are not only frowned upon, but seriously censored. Polygamy is very rare, lifelong monogamy being the rule. As expected, a missionary approves. More interesting are their religious beliefs, and the author finds out that they believe in a single Creator, a God referred to as *Nzambi*. There are also some beautiful creation Myths, but as always it is

¹ Svenska Missionsförbundet is

very hard to ascertain whether those are authentic or later borrowings. Their supreme God does not play much part in ordinary quotidian life, instead this is spent fencing off the evil spirits of the departed. Man is composed of three parts, *nyutu* (body), *murima* (heart) and *muhumu* (breath). The latter can leave man during sleep and allow him to visit far away places in his dreams. Dreams can be shared, thus constituting a parallel reality.

In conclusion the book contains few if any outmoded opinions as to the racial superiority of the white man, except what pertains to his Civilization and religious enlightenment. As noted above, the latter opinions are still prevalent. Of course Christian morality, if taken *ad notam*, preaches that all men are equal in front of God, an opinion, which with minor and obvious modification, is the basis for the present political correctness. The author being a serious missionary adheres to those views, but that does not prevent him to view the natives with sympathy and compassion, which he does without being condescending. He had a long life and it would have been interesting to partake of his views of Africa after decolonization. Modern DNA studies reveal a large genetic diversity among the different pygmy people, and that they are quite distinct from other human populations, suggesting an early split, maybe going as far back as 60'000 years ago. One should however always keep in mind, that as a mammal species, the human species shows very little diversity, which suggests that the human population most likely went through a bottle-neck some 100'000 years ago, and became almost extinct.

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