

Batwa

Profile

Originally forest dwellers, the few thousand Batwa in Uganda have been almost entirely dispossessed of their land by the combined pressures of government departments responsible for conservation, and cultivators, notably Bakiga, claiming land. They live in the South-West of Uganda in the districts of Bundibugyo, Kabale, Kisoro and Rukungiri. The Bwindi Impenetrable National Forest of Uganda was the home of the Batwa before they were evicted, causing them to become dependent on the

Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest Conservation Trust (MBIFCT).

Historical context

For centuries, the Batwa depended on hunting and gathering from the forest. However, today, only a few Batwa still live in Echuuya Forest Reserve and Semliki National Park; most live on the periphery of their ancestral forest lands. The Batwa's dispossession and landlessness is due to the

environmental conservation and ecological measures of the Ugandan government and international agencies. In the early 1990s, the Ugandan government declared the Semliki National Park a protected area and evicted all those who had entered and settled in the area, including Batwa.

Further, to make way for the famous mountain gorillas in Bwindi and Mgahinga forests, the Batwa were 'relocated' by the MBIFCT without their free and informed consent, and without any public hearing. This was the last straw for the Batwa who had gradually been displaced from the forests by settler farming communities and logging companies, who had greatly damaged the forest and imposed private land rights limiting the Batwa's freedom of movement. While the MBIFCT provides

some Batwa families with land leases of a very short duration as a 'solution', it is unknown what will happen after the leases expire. The largest problem is that only a few families are covered under the scheme and most are now 'squatters' on neighbours' lands.

The Batwa have been forced to join new religions and participate in modern lifestyles. In a 2001 MRG report on Ugandan minorities, the account was given of Rajab Daniel Mbunga who was circumcized by Muslims (thus acquiring the name Rajab) and baptized by Christians (acquiring the name Daniel), while still consulting his ancestors as Mbunga. Daniel Rajab Mbunga would attend all places of worship with a strategy to see who offered better promises of clothing, food, spiritual renewal and other benefits to his family and community.

Current issues

The drastic change to their lifestyle, along with their small number and despised status, has brought the

Ugandan Batwa close to being wiped out. In July 2006, the Uganda Land Alliance for Coalition of Pastoral Civil Society Organizations (COPACSO) warned that the few thousand Batwa (Twa) of Uganda are in danger of extinction. The organization's report warned of starvation and loss of social cohesion among desperate Batwa who lost their homes in the Bwindi Impenetrable Game Park when this became a World Heritage Site for preservation of endangered mountain gorillas in 1992.

The loss of their ancestral forest home has had devastating effects. It has prohibited the access to traditional herbal remedies in the forest, while their access to modern health services is meagre. The Batwa have certain spiritual and religious ties with forests. Specific sites are revered and considered central to their existence. Each geographical area, especially those inside forests, has a name that relates to history and the remote past - the world of mythical ancestors. Batwa are poorly represented politically, re-inforcing their marginalisation. Access to education - as well as other social services - is weak.