

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Sylvia Sikundar. *Forest Singer*. New York: Barefoot Books, 1999. 32 pp. Ages 4-8. \$15.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-902283-60-9.

Reviewed by George H. Ulrich (Milwaukee Public Museum)

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Although Sikundar's book *Forest Singer* is nicely illustrated by Alison Astill and carries a positive message to children, there are some problems. I think the most glaring is the use of the term "Pygmy." Political correctness aside, I believe that it is important to call people what they call themselves. I sympathize with the author's difficulty here and, in fact, most scholars in the field today continue to use the word as a general designation. The "pygmies" treated in this book are located in the "Mountains of the Moon" in western Uganda (I have not been able to confirm the presence of pygmy groups in Uganda). They are given no ethnic designation other than pygmies, and the reader is not provided with a location map. Since the reader does not know who they are, he/she can only guess that they are an eastern-most extension of the larger Mbuti group. A clue to their identity may be concealed in the name of the protagonist—Mabuti. From what I have read, this does not sound like an Mbuti name.

The generally accepted anthropological term for these people, Mbuti is not without difficulty. If we are going to be accurate, the Mbuti are only those former hunting-gathering groups that live in or near the Ituri forest in northwestern Democratic Republic of Congo. The Mbuti net-hunters include the culturally distinct f archers who inhabit the same general region. The Aka and Sua people also live further north in this general geographical area. They are not Mbuti. Duffy uses the name *BaMiki BaNdula*, "Children of the Forest," (Duffy 1984:2; bamiki nde ndura, Turnbull 1965:310) to refer to both f and Mbuti groups. I use this self-designation in my courses and museum work as a general replacement for pygmy and also where "Mbuti" may not be applicable. I believe it captures their reverence for the forest and their relationship with it.

I also have a minor objection to the generalization that all pygmies sing. True, singing is very much a part of their lives. It constitutes virtually the whole of traditional Mbuti music. As Robert F. Thompson points

out, it is more likely that Mbuti yodel through the forest rather than actually sing (Thompson 1989). I wonder how Mabuti was at yodeling. I have a sense that this treatment perpetuates the stereotype of the happy primitive "little" people whose innocent relationship with nature is consistently held up today as an ideal in contrast with the mechanized monotony of modernity. This characterization may perpetuate the "romance" and fiction of the Mbuti created years ago by Colin Turnbull (Duffy 1986:19) and now generally discredited. The author does not place pygmy/Mbuti singing in any cultural context as such—they do it for fun. It is my understanding that Mbuti sing not only for sheer pleasure but perhaps more importantly to honor their "Mother" the rain forest. The polyphonic musical expression of the Mbuti is justifiably famous and is the basis for contemporary musical forms such as those of Mickey Hart. (<http://www.uampta.berkeley.edu/exhibits.mguti.music.html>)

On a more positive note, the illustrations are excellent. They show the traditional *ai* or leaf house. I also liked very much the "tour" of the local animal life including hippos, leopards, and crocodiles among others. The children are shown wearing a mixture of Western and more indigenous clothing which I feel is accurate. Teachers and children can make good use of the images and their interaction with Mabuti and his peers.

I thought the story line was very positive. It encourages children to respect difference and promotes tolerance. I read the message here, as "practice will be rewarded." No matter how much you are mocked, put down, or laughed at, if you believe in yourself and keep trying you will succeed. A good lesson indeed! There is also considerable warmth; humor and playfulness, which most writers agree are traits of the pygmy peoples.

In summary, I feel that in spite of more politically correct objections to the use of the word pygmy the book has merit. After all, how many ways can we employ circumlocution for words that were once technical and have

now become, to some at least, pejorative. Pygmy, as an ethnic designation, may be appropriate in some contexts and as was pointed out earlier, it continues to be used by scholars. However, I believe that in the case of *Forest Singer*, simply calling them what/who they call themselves and using an authentic Mbuti name for the hero would have gone a long way in making this an even better work.

References and Bibliography

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