
Central Africa: The Twa Alienation from their Forests Impact Doubly on Women

The Twa were the first inhabitants of the equatorial forests of the Great Lakes region. Originally a high-altitude forest people, inhabiting the mountains of the Albertine Rift Area in Central Africa, they specialized in hunting and gathering. At present, the Twa of the Great Lakes region of Central Africa live in Burundi, eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Rwanda and southwest Uganda.

They identify themselves as indigenous and share many of the characteristics of indigenous peoples. However, over decades they have suffered from the loss of their traditional forest habitat and its natural resources through war as well as through wildlife conservation and commercial exploitation. Also, the Twa's landlessness results from their historical occupation of forests where, like hunter-gatherer or 'Pygmy' peoples throughout Central Africa, their land rights were not recognized in customary or statute law.

In most of their traditional territory, the Twa have been forced to forsake their forest-based hunter-gatherer culture and economy. The demographic and political processes that have caused this include: deforestation by incoming farming and herding peoples, which started centuries ago in Burundi and Rwanda; and forest clearance for agri-development, infrastructure, logging, military zones and mining during the last century. In the last 50 years, Twa communities have been forcibly expelled from forest areas designated for "development" projects, and from conservation areas including the Parc des Volcans and Nyungwe forests in Rwanda, the Mgahinga and Bwindi Impenetrable Forest mountain gorilla parks in south-western Uganda and the Kahuzi-Biega National Park and Virunga National Park in DRC.

A central element of recent Twa history is the deeply entrenched discrimination and marginalization they experience from neighbouring ethnic groups. This has increased as the Twa have become alienated from their forests and have been forced to live on the margins of the dominant society.

Many Twa communities are transient squatters, constantly looking for land where they can lodge until they are moved on. Currently, the Twa are one of the most disadvantaged ethnic groups in the Great Lakes region in terms of land ownership. A study of Twa exclusion in Burundi showed that 53 per cent of Twa households were landless, and in Rwanda, 58% are landless. In 1995, 82 per cent of Ugandan Twa were entirely landless.

'These people who let us stay on their land, they call on us to cultivate [it]. If we refuse they say 'Move away, we no longer want you.' We are not settled here, because other local people are pressing the landowners saying 'What do you need Twa for?' and at any time we may have to shift and settle elsewhere. [...] The landlords don't let us put up toilets because they don't want anything permanent on their land, or holes which could be a problem for cultivation later. But if they catch us defecating in the fields, they are angry. My daughter was caught and was forced to remove the faeces with her hands.' (Middle-aged Twa woman, Nyakabande/Kisoro, Uganda, May 2003)

Central African forest-based hunter-gatherers who are still able to maintain a traditional lifestyle

consider themselves to be in an intimate, nurturing relationship with the forest. The abundance of the forest is maintained by sharing between people, and between people and forest spirits, also by singing and dancing rituals, which ensure the support of spirits to help them satisfy all their needs. These peoples do not conceive of individual “ownership” of land and resources. People are free to use the natural resources they need and in whatever quantity. Clan membership, friendship and marriage give individuals access to a wide range of different areas in which they can hunt and gather food and other forest products.

In the few areas where the natural resources have not been captured by conservation interests, dominant ethnic groups or entrepreneurs, such as on Idjwi Island and the forested areas of eastern DRC outside national parks, the Twa have more livelihood choices based on the use of diverse natural resources, and are not as destitute. But in the remaining areas, Twa traditional livelihood systems, based on flexibility and mobility, and immediate returns from the exploitation of renewable natural resources are almost impossible to maintain. In today’s market economy, the Twa’s alternative strategies, based on the selling of labour or craft products, are scarcely able to meet the most basic daily needs of Twa households placing them among the poorest of the poor.

In these traditional forest-based societies women’s autonomy is assured by the collective nature of rights over resources, and their ability to access these resources freely and independently, in their own right and not as a consequence of their relationships with men. Overall, the factors that have contributed to the chronic landlessness of the Twa as a whole explain also the land situation of Twa women. However, they have lost opportunities for access to land, not only through the loss of traditional land rights of the Twa as a whole, but also due to the adoption of new attitudes to land ownership, especially within Twa communities dispossessed of their forest lands who have been drawn into the land tenure systems of neighbouring farming and herding groups. Women’s land rights in the few Twa communities that have secured some form of land ownership or use rights outside the forest are weaker than those under forest-based communal land tenure systems.

As indigenous people, Twa women suffer from social, economic and political marginalization, and as women they suffer unequal opportunities with respect to access to land, social services and representation.

“Now, we, the women of the forest, don’t have access to the forest. [...] We cry because we have a miserable life. Then, we could live, we had enough to eat, all our needs were satisfied. Now there is nothing.” (Middle-aged Twa woman from Buyungula/ Kabare, DRC at Women’s Rights Conference organized by the Congolese Twa organization PIDP in 2000).

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