

A Pygmy Model for Beautiful Parenting by Ushanda io Elima

The Efe Pygmies are "wholly non-aggressive," Jean-Pierre Hallet told me. Could that be true? Since Hallet largely grew up with the Efe in equatorial Africa, and has lived with them for much of his sixty plus years, I figured he might know.

And since aggressive people increasingly threaten our lives, both locally and internationally, his claim seemed worth checking out. Whether or not humans are genetically violent, as some maintain, has significant relevance for we who are peace activists. The root causes of aggression, both interpersonal and international, matter greatly regarding effective strategy for prevention and elimination of human violence. And, while I cannot tolerate false hope, I was feeling a need for first-hand information that could offer genuine hope of a better world for our human family.

My fascination with the African Pygmies began in the 1960s, when I read *The Forest People* by Colin Turnbull, who had lived with the Mbuti Pygmies for three years. In the late '60s I attended Turnbull's lecture series at the Museum of Natural History in New York City.

In the early 1970s I heard Jean-Pierre Hallet speak about the Efe Pygmies at the University of California in Berkeley. At that time he showed his 1972 documentary film on this indigenous African tribe. Later I read Hallet's book, *Pygmy Kitabu*. Hallet has lived with the culturally pure Efe Pygmies from early childhood. He gave startling evidence of the trusting, cooperative, and joyful lifestyle of these forest people.

Thus I was pleased to meet with Jean-Pierre Hallet in his Malibu home. He is six feet and four inches tall, far from pygmy size, and speaks with passion. He lost his right hand while dynamiting Lake Tanganyika for fish to feed a group of starving Africans in South Mossi. Dubbed "one of the most remarkable men of the 20th century," he is the only white man to become a member of the Bwame Secret Society, and a blood brother of the Lega, Tutsi, and Nande tribes. He is also an initiated Maasai warrior.

Mr. Hallet was Belgian, but moved to Zaire's Ituri Forest, where his artist father had been living, when he was only six months old. Hallet told me that, for the most part, he grew up with the Efe Pygmies. He went barefoot, wore a loincloth, and did everything that they did. He still spends time with them every year.

The following account of Pygmy life draws upon my meeting with Hallet, as well as other firsthand reports from him and Colin Turnbull. What emerges is a picture of a culture based on honoring - to use a Native American concept - "all our relations."

Sexual Maturity and Pregnancy

The Pygmies are well aware of the connection between sex and conception, Hallet explained during our meeting, and sexual relations before marriage are accepted. If a girl becomes pregnant, she always knows who the father is, because it is customary to have only one lover at a time. Should the couple wish to marry, they do. If they choose not to, then many men will want to marry the mother-to-be, because children are most desirable.

Birth

Hallet said he has delivered more than 500 African babies, Pygmy and non-Pygmy. He described Pygmy labor as being very short, natural, and easy, even for a first-time mother. And this is in spite of the fact that Pygmy babies are, proportionally, the biggest babies in the world. For example, an 80-pound Pygmy mother typically gives birth to an eight-pound baby, about one-tenth of her body weight. This would compare to a 130-pound woman birthing a 13-pound baby.

When the mother's membranes rupture, she notifies her two midwives, who then walk with her to the river, one on either side. "At the time of the pain," Hallet said, "she will walk and sing, sing and be joyous."

Once at the river, the pregnant woman squats on a flat rock. The midwives hold her on each side, and breath deeply with her in what Hallet referred to as "a tremendous feeling of oneness." When they feel the time has come, the women hold their breath. "They pause together," said Hallet, "and then you see the baby coming out."

One of the midwives briefly holds the baby upside down, washes the upper part of the body to make sure the baby is breathing well, and then returns the child to the mother for nursing. The other midwife works her teeth down the umbilical cord until she finds the narrow part, a few inches from the infant's abdomen. "This is the place where, if a baby were dropped from the womb of a standing mother, the weight of the child would be enough to break that cord at that point," said Hallet. The midwife bites this narrow part very slowly, and then gently squeezes the cord with her fingers. There is usually very little bleeding.

To celebrate the birth of her child, Hallet noted, a mother will sing this song:

**My heart is so joyous,
My heart flies in singing,
Under the trees of the forest,
The forest, our home, our mother.
In my net I have caught
A little bird,
A very little bird,
And my heart is caught
In the net with my little bird.**

During the birth, the father stays away. Birth is considered to be women's business. After birth, when the mother and baby have returned to their leafy, dome hut, the father comes to them and asks permission to enter. Then the father might clap his hands and thank his wife for their very wanted child.

Newborn Care

According to Hallet, there is no bonding ritual, but there is a bond - "like a fruit to its branch" - a physical attachment for the first year or so. During this year, the baby is "never separated from the mother." In Hallet's view, this constant contact is one reason why Pygmy infants rarely cry. Pygmy babies appear to feel good. "They are satisfied in all of their requirements," he stated. On the rare occasion when a baby does cry, it is only for a moment, because the baby's need is immediately taken care of. Often this means nursing, which satisfies the baby's necessity for close contact and attention, as well as for nourishment.

Hallet remarked that the baby is usually carried in front, although sometimes on the back. In either position, Pygmies feel it is essential to maintain skin-to-skin contact, with the child naked against the mother's bare skin. If clothing is needed for warmth, the mother wraps a cloth around both herself and her child, not between them. This constant skin contact continues for at least the first six months. Thereafter, the mother continues to provide plenty of touching as well as baby-led nursing.

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A Pygmy baby continues to nurse for about five years, Hallet reported. If there's any milk left after the new baby is finished, the breast may go to the baby before, and then to the child before that one, in turn. The priority is always the newly born child.

Hallet said, "Sometimes you'll see little children playing, perhaps making a bow and arrow. They interrupt their play to go to their mother, reach for her breast and suckle a little bit . . . still finding the warmth of a few drops of milk."

The breasts of women with many children may be really flat, going all the way down to the waist, commented Hallet. I thought this might result from a combination of breastfeeding along with a physically active lifestyle and no bras. Although such "droopy breasts" may be unattractive from a modern point of view, to the Pygmies it is a good sign, I learned, because it indicates a woman has been feeding a lot of children. Prolonged, child-led nursing also provides a natural form of birth control and child spacing.

The Pygmies do not equate breasts with sexual stimulation, Hallet claimed, and they do not use the breast for erogenous foreplay. The breast is considered sacred, reserved for the child.

The father takes great interest in his baby. He plays, holds and hugs the child as much as the mother does. Men and women equally manifest love and care. In fact, fathers will sometimes hold their babies for very long periods of time. Hallet recalled, "The most beautiful time for a father is when he holds his baby for the very first time. He will hold his newborn with great . . . tenderness. And usually he will cry, because he is so touched by his baby."

Close physical contact, nursing as often as the child feels the need, emotional warmth, and loving care are among the basic requirements of very young children, according to the Pygmies. Fulfilling these needs maximizes the child's potential to develop into a naturally sociable and responsible human being who can enjoy a good life.

Childhood

Family members sleep together. The big girls cuddle on the left side of the hut with the mother. The boys line up beside the father, on his right. The youngest child who is still breastfeeding sleeps between the father and mother. Pygmies feel that this is an intrinsic part of life, Hallet said. Since their only blankets are each other, they cuddle and fit against one another's bodies in a very natural way.

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This feeling of closeness carries beyond the family hut. Hallet said that children refer to their parents' peers as "mother" or "father." Children outside the immediate family are called "brother" or "sister." As Hallet's documentary revealed, there is a great deal of affectionate touching among all of the Pygmies. Babies and small children are held and carried. Older children and adults frequently hold hands or sit with an arm around a friend, or place their head in another's lap. Anyone feeling the need for reassurance may touch someone briefly or go for a hug. Many enjoy cuddling.

Girls and boys are treated and valued equally, according to Hallet. Marriage involves no dowry or bride-payment, but rather simple exchanges. Most areas of work are not limited solely to one gender or the other. A man will gather food if he passes something tasty and his hands are free. And all the people - men, women and children - play a part in the hunt.

Hallet never saw a Pygmy adult hit or criticize a child. Nor do they tell their children how to behave. When I asked how they control their children, Hallet answered, "They don't. The children do not need to be controlled. Whatever the adults do, the children do. The woman goes to gather wood for the fire, and the little girl follows and picks up a few pieces too."

Once he saw a toddler heading straight toward a blazing fire, and called out to alert the mother. The mother calmly replied, "Let him go." As Hallet put it, the mother knew the child would soon feel the heat and slow down. She trusted nature, including the instinctual wisdom of her child's human nature. The

child might touch a glowing twig and learn about fire without serious harm to either his fingers or his budding self-confidence.

"This is probably the most striking difference between the Pygmies and our society," said Hallet. "They do not tell their children what to do or what not to do."

Adulthood

After an easy birth and attentive childcare, what quality of life do Pygmies experience in maturity?

According to Hallet, Efe Pygmies are physically healthy. Living traditionally, they do not succumb to such modern diseases as high blood pressure, heart disease, or cancer. Death is usually due to pulmonary diseases like pneumonia, a result of the constant nearly 100 percent humidity of their forest environment. The second leading cause of death is what Hallet termed "accidents," such as being crushed by a falling tree.

For simple ailments like an infected cut, the Pygmies have natural medicines derived from various combinations of roots and plant juices. They have a cure for every normally occurring illness, according to Hallet. They either eat the substance, drink it, or make a little scratch and absorb it into the bloodstream much like an injection. Through centuries of trial and error, they know what works and what does not.

The emotional health of the Pygmies is also impressive. Hallet, constantly touched by their goodness, believes that the simplicity, harmony, and serenity that the Pygmies experience are qualities we could learn to incorporate. "They are not afraid," he said. "They are totally secure." They have a high level of respect for themselves and others.

Most significantly, Efe Pygmies are free of hatred, greed, and competitive feelings. Physical violence against others is forbidden.

Hallet's documentary reveals the role that social responsibility plays in a telling scene of conflict between an Efe wife and husband. The argument heats up with much shouting, hands on hips, and dramatic finger waving. Suddenly the husband picks up a stick. The wife disappears from the screen - but soon reappears bearing a club taller than herself. At this point, the women hold back the wife, and the men hold back the husband.

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What usually happens when a husband and wife fight, says Hallet, is that they are encouraged. "If a man is about to hit his wife, the others will give him a stick and say, 'Hit her with this. You are a strong man. You can kill her!' By this time, the husband already feels a little ashamed. The others group around and call out, 'Okay! Go! Go for it!' And then he realizes how foolish he looks. They end up making a joke out of it, a sort of soap opera. Then every body claps, and they are happy."

Pygmies express all of their emotions freely. According to Hallet, if Pygmies feel like crying, they cry. If they want to scream, they scream. They yell. It is acceptable for a man to cry openly. The pygmies do not suppress their emotions; instead, they say, "Tell the truth. Do not hide it - let it out."

Turnbull referred to the bright-eyed, open look of the playful Pygmies, and was surprised by the extent of their emotional freedom: they may even fall to the ground and roll around when expressing intense sorrow, or laughter.

Even though Pygmies usually do pretty much what they feel like doing, community relationships do not suffer. As Hallet sees it, a major part of their great personal freedom comes from a mutual feeling of trust.

As he spoke I thought, because the innate trust human babies are born with is not betrayed by their caregivers, that trust can continue. According to Hallet, Pygmies concentrate their attention on the betterment of their personal relationships. He said that the entire Efe society had not one criminal, not one rapist, one molester, or one case of incest.

Although a man might think of making love with a woman other than his wife, knowing how that would threaten the root of their sacred marriage for life, he would resist the temptation.

The Pygmies have no chiefs, no courts or prisons. Turnbull wrote that they did not want individual power, preferring shared decision-making.

More than anything else, what forms the basis of the healthy relationships that Pygmies enjoy is respect. For instance, respect is shown in the handling of food, which is shared with all. If food is scarce, the first to be fed are the children and then the elders - those who are the most vulnerable.

Great respect is shown for the elders. In Pygmy society, the elders are "the stars of the show." According to Hallet, they are the most important people because they have the wisdom, the honor, the beauty that deserves respect. They have worked all their lives. They have given a lot of love to other people. They naturally reap the reward of becoming truly important in the eyes of all others. The Pygmies have a saying: "Thank God if you live to grow old."

When I heard that I wondered how many of our modern elders feel as honored and grateful in old age.

Pygmies also show respect for their forest environment and resources. "Never cut the tall trees," they say in Hallet's Pygmy Kitabu. Ecology is a natural part of their religion.

According to Hallet, the Pygmies believe in one God, one Spirit, one Creator of all life. They consider no form of punishment, no hell or revenge, because they see God as being only benevolent. In *The Forest People*, Turnbull records the words of a song he heard his Pygmy companions sing: ". . . If darkness is, then the darkness must be good." So completely do the Pygmies experience a trustworthy world.

The Future: Danger of Extinction

Pygmy lives are now endangered. "It is impossible for them to survive with their traditional hunting and gathering because their forest is being destroyed at a tremendous rate," said Hallet. In fact, many experts predicted that the Efe Pygmies would be extinct by 1977. In that year, their population numbered 3,800 - not yet extinct, although a significant decline from the two or three million who were once the only inhabitants of central Africa.

"The forest, that perfect ecosystem that took millions of years to be established, is destroyed now to less than ten percent of its former glory," said Hallet.

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He repeatedly stressed the view that humanity needs to help the Pygmies survive because they are also the key to our own survival. "The Pygmies are the living evidence of our innate goodness." In a world threatened by oppression, conflict, and violence, these forest people demonstrate that when we gently birth, nurture, and guide our children, without violence and other repressive controls, we human beings can live together in freedom and harmony.

Nurtured by a community that reflects the loving care adults received early in life, children develop freely in an environment of safety, warm concern, cooperation and shared pleasures. The Pygmies say, "Love the children extravagantly, with all your heart!"

Summary: A Sustained Culture Reveals Possibilities For Humanity

The images and expectations we hold in our minds powerfully influence our children's development. The picture of "human nature" given by some modern people depicts a human "inheritance" of violent and selfish "instincts." When we believe that humanity is innately violent or greedy, we fearfully demand obedience from our children, and strive to maintain rigid controls over the emotional responses that we have been taught to fear in our own childhoods. Dominance over others' behavior, and over our own natural emotions, brings neither inner nor outer peace. Instead, viewing human nature as dangerous has helped to create perilous consequences for the human race.

The image of human nature demonstrated by the living Pygmies offers us the hope of better ways of relating, arising from a more accurate view of our original nature. The Efe Pygmy culture reassures us that we need not assume that human beings are genetically violent or greedy. Therefore we need not teach our children to suppress themselves or to blindly obey others. Pygmy society shows us that when children's needs - their life requirements - are lovingly provided for, they will not grow up harboring unmet needs that may become greed. They will not develop the rage and fear that result from early neglect and punishment, and may be destructively expressed for the rest of their lives.

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Startling to our modern minds, it becomes clear that it is unnecessary to teach our children to love. Instead we can trust and support their innate tendencies toward empathy and generosity, which I too experienced while living in Africa and elsewhere. We can safely allow our children emotional freedom, while gently guiding them in appropriate, mutually respectful ways of behavioral expression.

In short, the Pygmies demonstrate that we do not have to war with our children. We do not have to teach them violence by our example when they are small. Instead we can cooperate with them in the graceful unfolding of their inborn integrity and kindness.

What happens in our parenting as we begin to act from this harmonious image of human nature? For one, we find ourselves reviving such ancient practices as natural homebirth, unrestricted breastfeeding, carrying our infants and maintaining close physical contact with them. Rather than punishment, we teach our children by example. In so doing, we are not simply returning to our roots. Rather, in our individual ways, we are weaving a new synthesis appropriate for our times, one that creates fresh possibilities for the whole of humanity.

From the self-respecting awareness of our inherent human goodness, a sweeter, grander version of ourselves will emerge.

Pygmy Proverbs:

"Goodness and kindness put an end to badness."

"God returns the good that one does."

"With truth one may reach God."

"A bad mother is not a mother."

"Children are people's treasures."

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