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REVIEW

Linda Hroníková – Zuzana Schierová et al.

Pygmejové. Nejmenší lidé pohledem antropologie & Šebestova sbírka v Hrdličkově muzeu člověka PŘF UK.

Praha, 2015.

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The term “Pygmies” is generally used for any population of an average height of less than 150 cm. Such populations may be found in many countries; a vast majority reside in Africa and Asia. Many of them are not genetically linked to each other, so the term “Pygmy” simply refers to the external appearance of the populations’ members. It is then no surprise that the name is non-native to any of these ethnic groups, and was ascribed to them by the Europeans. The publication edited by Hroníková and Schierová explains why the term is, despite its lack of academic validity, still in use, and proceeds to look closer at the most renowned bearers of this name – the Central African Pygmies. The description on the cover promises the reader a comprehensive overview of various aspects of their way of life including subsistence, rituals, mutilations, mythology, dances or music, as well as the perspectives of evolutionary biology and physical anthropology.

In addition to this, the description promises not only the “traditional” way of living, as described by P. J. Schebesta in the first half of the 20th century, but also the contemporary lifestyle of these societies to be presented. Besides the information on the Pygmy groups, the book also features the Schebesta collection that forms a part of the permanent exhibition in the Hrdlička Museum of Man, Faculty of Science, Charles University in Prague.

The book is divided into eight chapters and two appendices. Based on the topics of the chapters, it can be broadly divided into several parts. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with physical aspects of “being a Pygmy” through the perspectives of evolutionary biology and physical anthropology, respectively. Chapter 3 introduces the biography of Paul Joachym Schebesta, a missionary who studied Pygmies and authored a number of significant publications on this topic; the first appendix lists his complete bibliography. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the Schebesta collection that is comprised of skeletal remains, a collection of hair samples and casts of faces, body parts and bones. Chapters 5 (patterns of subsistence), 6 (body mutilations) and 7 (music and mythology) fall within

the range of cultural anthropology. The last chapter describes a recent expedition focused on visiting contemporary Pygmies in the Democratic Republic of Congo, as seen by one of the travellers. The book is concluded by the second appendix, i.e. short biographies of selected scholars and experts on Pygmies, as well as relevant filmography and bibliography. The text is illustrated with drawings and photographs; tables were used where appropriate.

The publication seeks to be accessible and appealing to all readers, whether familiar with both cultural and physical anthropology, or not; a goal that is understandable, but difficult to achieve. The result of this leads to a notable diversity in language used; as some chapters are written in a rather simple, almost colloquial form at times (e.g. chapter 7), whereas others contain highly specialised terminology (e.g. chapter 1), albeit with explanatory remarks. This was somewhat expected however, due to the variety of topics that naturally stem from such a multidisciplinary approach. It may have been helpful, however, to reconsider the order of chapters so that the reader does not start with the most difficult one.

The book captures the “traditional” Pygmies, as described by P. J. Schebesta. Authors openly admit that they omit the changes in their everyday lives in the present, and purposefully focus on the past. This approach is understandable considering the idea of describing the Pygmies before their encounter with the influences of the globalised world. It would be fair, however, to include descriptions of their life in modern times. Chapter 8 (narrative from an expedition) clearly reflects the traveller’s disappointment from the discovery that “true” Pygmies are impossible to find nowadays. This approach is problematic to say the least.

In today’s ever-changing world, capturing the diversity of no-longer-extant ways of life can serve to enrich our knowledge on humankind in the face of globalisation. However, it should be kept in mind that it is not possible to “freeze” culture. Change is inevitable, and what may seem to be a description of the insignificant and obvious today may be an important source of information in the future. A scientific publication should provide a complete set of information, not select those that support their intentions and dismiss others – or, as in this case, be disappointed that their expected ideal is not there.

Cited literature largely relies on the work of P. J. Schebesta. This is understandable as he was a respected expert on Pygmies; on the other hand, the authors themselves point out that some data, especially on Pygmies’ physical appearance, may be outdated. It is a pity that the book does not bring recent data obtained from the study of modern Pygmy populations, as their comparison with historical sources would be both interesting and meaningful.

The book is not based on any actual recent field research (with the exception of chapter 8) and does not strive to bring any new, previously unknown or unpublished data. Its goal is to summarise basic information about the Pygmies from the perspective of multiple fields, and to introduce the Schebesta collection in the Hrdlička Museum of Man. As an easy-to-read introduction to the world of Pygmies, this goal was achieved. The abundance of references to other resources makes it an excellent starting point for those who may hunger for more information on the topic.