

IN THE ARMS OF AFRICA: THE LIFE OF COLIN TURNBULL

by Roy Richard Grinker



I have spent the past two years writing the biography of the late anthropologist Colin Turnbull, best known for his bestselling books, *The Forest People* and *The Mountain People*. While I initially considered the biography of an anthropologist to be far afield from the usual anthropological enterprise—fieldwork in local communities—I now view it as a powerful tool for understanding how an anthropologist's life is inextricably linked with his or her work. Despite the popularity and influence of his books, which are required reading in many high schools and colleges, even decades after their publication, little is known about how and why Colin Turnbull wrote them.

Narrating the life of such an unusual person as Colin Turnbull is like narrating the life of a foreign culture. Biography, like ethnography, is the study of the structure and meaning of the ideas and actions accessible to an outside observer. As an outsider looking in, my perspectives on someone else's world are limited.

I see what my biases let me see; I see much of what other people—my informants—want me to see. Turnbull even wrote his own autobiography of sorts, an unpublished account of his relationship with his partner of thirty years, Joseph Towles, in order to influence the work of a future biographer. But I am both constrained and liberated because, as an outsider, I can see the obstacles posed by the people I am studying as a topic for analysis. Because I can sometimes see things invisible to those who live within that world, Turnbull's attempt to influence his own biography became a central focus of my book.

When I, a non-gay writer, tried to sell the biography of Turnbull, a gay writer, to major publishing houses, I was confronted with the same sort of challenge I have heard so often within

African studies and in anthropology more generally: how, as an outsider, can you understand your subject? The fact is that, inasmuch as the author constructs the subject in the act of writing, the author is always an integral part of the subject. My teachers in college and graduate school consistently emphasized that much of the work of ethnography is a self-reflective effort to overcome one's biases. And when the first draft of my biography of Turnbull was returned to me from a gay editor with a post-it reading simply, "You're straight," I knew that I had failed to extend myself into Colin Turnbull's world. It is not that I wanted to mask my own identity, but rather that my own identity had gotten in the way. I had been unable to represent Turnbull's world in a way that seemed meaningful to a gay reader or, almost certainly, that would have been meaningful to Turnbull himself. When I looked carefully at the manuscript, I realized that my representations of gay relationships were clinical, distant, and mechanical; my representations of heterosexual relationships, in contrast, were nuanced, deep, complex, and passionate. Biography, like ethnography, became a process of self-reflection and change.

My interest in Colin Turnbull began in 1985 when I left for central Africa for the first six months of what would ultimately be twenty-two months of fieldwork with the Pygmies and farmers of the Ituri rainforest. I intended to disprove Colin Turnbull. No cultural anthropologist had studied the Pygmies so intensively, and since his classic book, *The Forest People*, published in 1961, no cultural anthropologist had even attempted a follow-up study. Like many other anthropologists, I assumed that Turnbull's characterizations of Pygmy life were romantic and somewhat fictionalized. When I finished my fieldwork, I accused Turnbull of not knowing the language of the Pygmies and of ignoring important aspects of Pygmy life that would have led him to construct a different picture of Pygmy society. It was only many years later, after I found myself occupying his former faculty position at George Washington University and became close friends with the

executor of his estate, Professor Robert Humphrey, that I stopped seeing him as a scholar I needed to debunk and became aware of the complicated relationship between his work and his life.

When I decided to write the biography, I remembered that I had corresponded with Colin Turnbull when I was in the field. I located one letter from him in my files, but even though I was working on the biography, it still took me nearly six weeks to read it. What I found was disturbing and the reason

why I had removed the letter from memory: it is one of the kindest professional letters I have ever received. I felt terrible not only because of his generosity—indeed, the letter also included much practical advice

on working with the Pygmies—but because I never replied to the letter. And when, subsequently, he wrote to me again, suggesting that the Pygmies I was studying were too westernized and that I should go elsewhere, I was too angry to respond. I never heard from him again.

It is difficult to immerse oneself so fully in a single life unless driven to do so by something more than simple curiosity. For me, it was the knowledge that I had failed to meet a remarkable person because I was consumed by a youthful narcissism. And because I wanted so much to dismiss his work, I also failed to engage with him intellectually. What I discovered next was that his fascinating life opened a window on the Mbuti Pygmies of central Africa and the Ik of Uganda, because nearly everything we know about these



two societies comes from the work of Colin Turnbull.

Turnbull was born in 1924 at home in Harrow, England to a Scottish accountant father James Rutherford Turnbull and a Canadian-Irish mother Dorothy Chapman. He was raised primarily by a series of German nannies and was educated at the prestigious Westminster School, where he became a renowned organist. After a year at Magdalen College, Oxford, he joined the Royal Navy

Volunteer Reserves, where he served on motor launches searching for torpedos and recovering dog tags from soldiers killed at sea. Though he had every comfort during childhood, Turnbull interpreted his privilege as a duty to help people of color,

those with little money or the possibility for social mobility, those who in any way suffered from discrimination. In fact, he felt himself to be discriminated against, coerced into living in a society that seemed to value status assigned at birth more than achievement, the individual more than the community, inequality rather than equality. This was not simple white liberal guilt. Loving those who were oppressed was an act of resistance against his society and his parents, neither of whom had given him the emotional stability and nurturing he wanted. In the poor or marginalized, he saw himself, and he determined to do for them what had not been done for himself.

Following the war, Turnbull completed a shortened course at Oxford for a bachelor's degree and enrolled at Benares Hindu University in

Benares, India, where he earned a master's degree in Indian religions and philosophy. Between 1949 and 1951, he was one of only a handful of Europeans to be permitted residence at the exclusively Brahman ashram of one of the most illustrious female gurus in contemporary Indian history, Sri Anandamayi Ma. India, she told him, was about self discovery. There was no real Anandamayi or Colin Turnbull. Anandamayi Ma taught him that there was only that which Colin made real for himself. She also taught him that something beautiful and pure can emerge from something ordinary, inconspicuous, or ugly, like a lotus growing up from the mud, its beauty and purity unsullied by its origin. Truth could be found in the most unexpected places, in the mountaintops of India or in temples and ashrams, but perhaps just as likely on a river bank, a city slum, or a farmer's field. It might even be found in one person, someone who Turnbull might someday meet and in whom, deep inside, there was a brilliant light, an inner truth, struggling to blossom.

With an American friend, a music teacher from Ohio named Newton Beal, Turnbull went to Kenya to stay with a wealthy entrepreneur, Sir Charles Markham, who recommended Turnbull and Beal visit his friend Patrick Putnam, a former Ph.D. candidate in anthropology from Harvard University. Putnam, who was living among the Pygmies and managing a small tourist hotel there, received Turnbull warmly but when Turnbull ran out of money, Putnam could not honor his request for paid work. Turnbull found work instead with the famed Hollywood producer, Sam Spiegel, for whom he constructed and transported the boat, "The African Queen," for the famed film of the same name, starring Humphrey Bogart and Katherine Hepburn.

Turnbull found the Mbuti Pygmies to be even more exciting than the *African Queen*. He was quickly convinced that Mbuti culture, especially their music, spirituality, and child rearing practices, was what Anandamayi told him he might one day find. Widely seen as a "primitive" or simple people, Turnbull found the Mbuti to have social

institutions more humane and more sophisticated than anything that existed in western civilization. As described in *The Forest People*, Mbuti children are never pitted against one another. People live in harmony not because they are coerced to do so by laws, the threat of violence, or other external impositions, but because of an internal desire for unity, reciprocity, and social equality, a desire every Mbuti parent unselfconsciously and automatically foster in their children. A Mbuti child learns to love others not because love is imposed upon him, but because he has spent at least the first three years of his life, not with nannies, but in his mother's arms, or on her back, and in her bed, in a relationship of constant and selfless giving and receiving. Mbuti teenagers, he wrote, practice sex freely and yet have no unwanted pregnancies, while in the west sex is often seen as something impure and dirty and without spirituality. Turnbull wrote that old age in Europe and the United States is a "frightening anteroom to extinction," while among the Mbuti it is seen as a time of wisdom, serenity and power.

In addition, for Turnbull, the Mbuti's apparent subordination to the neighboring farmers was only playacting. The Mbuti pretended to be inferior when they were, in fact, far superior in almost every way. Turnbull loved seeing the Mbuti outsmart the villagers, proving to him that those in power are fooled by their own pretenses, and that the imaginary evolutionary schemes of western science were merely self-congratulatory illusions. And so, when Turnbull was appointed curator of African Ethnology at the American Museum of Natural History in 1959, he continued his quest for the unpolished gem, and thought he found it in Joseph Towles, a poor, uneducated African American man with whom Colin would live for the next thirty years. When he first saw Towles, Turnbull said to himself, "I am back in Africa."

Together, Towles and Turnbull went to Uganda in the late 1960s to study the Ik, a people on the brink of utter starvation and extinction, a people whose depravity Turnbull described in stark detail. In *The Mountain People*, Turnbull had thanked his Indian guru, Sri Anandamayi Ma, for

giving him his mantra, "Satyam, sivam, sundarm" (truth, goodness, beauty), and for convincing him that those qualities could be found if he looked hard enough; they were the qualities he had found among the Pygmies and which he believed the Ik had cast aside. The Ik, he believed, had become materially and morally impoverished, having abandoned the values of family, love, and altruism for a cut-throat individualism matched only by western civilization. He watched with horror as Ik men and women attacked one another, even within their own families. They induced vomiting and then ate the vomit; people defecated on each others' doorsteps, expressed joy at the tragedies of others, and having abandoned any effort to cooperate or share, the stronger left the weaker, usually children and the elderly, to die of starvation. "That is the point," he wrote in *The Mountain People*, "at which there is an end to truth, to goodness, and to beauty...The Ik have relinquished all luxury in the name of individual survival, and the result is that they live on as a people without life, without passion, beyond humanity."

He proposed to the Ugandan government that the Ik society should be eliminated, that individuals should be rounded up and dispersed over an area wide enough to make sure they never found each other again. The Ugandan government and the anthropological community were outraged. Angered by the proposal and what was called a complete lack of objectivity, Fredrik Barth, the anthropologist who led the international attack against Turnbull, wrote that *The Mountain People* "deserves both to be sanctioned and to be held up as a warning to us all" and that the book was "dishonest," "grossly irresponsible and harmful," threatening to the "hygiene" of the discipline (1974). Turnbull was unmoved by the academic criticisms because he did not want to write for academics. For him, the truth of the central African rain forest or the tragedy of the Ugandan mountains could not be conveyed in an academic publication to be read by a few hundred scholars. It had to reach millions of people and to come from the heart, not through science but through the

emotional and spiritual paths for which his anthropology was an ongoing quest.

Turnbull hated the Ik. The Pygmies, and even Joseph Towles (who had begun his training as an anthropologist), empowered him. But because he could do little to stop the famine and social behaviors that emerged in that context, the Ik threatened his role as protector or saviour. Because they did not seem to respect him or care for him, the Ik never gave him the sense of self-worth he derived from Joseph and other underdogs. And because the Ik never gave him someone like the Pygmy young boy, Kenge, whom he could love and idolize, he grew angry and lonely. The Ik were unlikable to Colin to the end, sadly unyielding to any Pygmalion-like efforts. Joe would undermine him too. During their fieldwork period, Towles became depressed and alcoholic and had many affairs. Turnbull saw himself becoming an utterly miserable person and his depiction of the Ik in his ethnographic writings reflects that change.

Turnbull resigned from the American Museum of Natural History amid charges that the museum had discriminated against him and Towles. But he left his mark on the museum in the permanent exhibition in the *Hall of Man in Africa*, which he conceived and executed and which remains on display at the turn of the millenium. Turnbull would subsequently teach at Vassar College, Hofstra, Virginia Commonwealth, West Virginia, George Washington, and New York universities. From 1975 and 1977, he devoted most of his energies to producing the play "The Ik" with Peter Brook, the former director of the Royal Shakespeare Company.

Between 1970 and 1988, Turnbull and Towles lived openly as a gay, interracial couple in one of the smallest and most conservative rural towns, Lancaster, Virginia. Few people know that during this time, Turnbull devoted himself to championing the cases of death row inmates in Florida and Virginia. He had once argued that a starving society in Uganda should be eradicated, an argument for which he was widely condemned both by anthropologists and human rights workers. Now

he would try to show the humanity of the death row inmate. In focusing on the prisoners as victims, Turnbull echoed his earlier work among the Ik. He did not write about the relationship between his studies of prisons and the Ik, probably because, given the on-going controversy over his Ik project, he wanted to avoid deflecting attention from the prisoners or giving the impression that his prison mission was an act of repentance for having failed to help the Ik.

Both projects focused on the humanity of the so-called depraved or inhuman, and the Ik were, indeed, something like prisoners, trapped in a drought-stricken land that was foreign to them. Turnbull had, of course, never believed there was anything essentially wrong with the Ik as human beings. It was their culture, or lack of culture, combined with an ecological tragedy, that was the problem. Likewise, the prisoners on death row were stripped of their humanity, confined in cages and treated like animals, by a penal system convinced that its own power was right and natural. From the perspective of the prison system, there was nothing wrong with the culture of discipline and punishment. When Colin Turnbull looked at the guards he must have seen himself in Uganda, dehumanized and unfeeling. Perhaps he could master that horrible experience for once and for all, do for the prisoners what he could not do for the Ik, and do it without losing his own compassion.

In 1983, Turnbull rejected tenure when it was offered to him at George Washington University and devoted himself to the care of Towles, who, only a few years after receiving a Ph.D. in sociology from Makerere University for his study of Mbo ritual in Zaire, began to suffer from AIDS. When Towles died in 1988, Turnbull buried two coffins, one for Towles and one for himself, and then virtually disappeared. He severed all family ties, donated his entire savings and real estate, worth about one million dollars in 1988 as well as all future royalties, to the United Negro College Fund. His tombstone, now overgrown with weeds on his former Virginia estate, says that both he and

Towles died on December 19, 1988, but Turnbull, in fact, outlived his death by nearly six years.

In 1989, Turnbull traveled to American Samoa, India, and Bloomington, Indiana. In Bloomington, he helped his former museum colleague, Thubten Norbu (the eldest brother of the Dalai Lama) build the Tibetan Cultural Center, and Norbu arranged for Colin to be trained as a Buddhist monk. He spent the last years of his life attempting to publish the works of Towles and training to become a Buddhist monk. In 1993, at the Nechung Monastery in Dharamsala, India, Turnbull was ordained a Gelong monk by the Dalai Lama and given the new name of Lobsong Rigdol. He died of AIDS on July 24, 1994 in Kilmarnock, Virginia and was buried next to Towles on their former Virginia estate. At Turnbull's request, there were no formal services. However, on January 21, 1995, in Epulu, Democratic Republic of Central African, the Mbuti Pygmies performed a funeral ceremony for both Turnbull and Towles.

Once we understand the relationship between Turnbull's life and work, *The Forest People* and *The Mountain People* make more sense. At some level, these books can tell us more about Turnbull than about the Mbuti or the Ik. Yet anthropologists continue to draw on Turnbull's descriptions as if they represent a verifiable reality. Turnbull never pretended to be an objective observer, and he offered his works more as subjective accounts than scientific descriptions. But if they were not scientific, then what were they? They were the expressions of someone searching, sometimes successfully and sometimes not, for the ideals he imagined as a child, glimpsed in India, and later discovered in the rainforest and in the person of Joseph Towles. Throughout his life, Turnbull was motivated by a deep-seated wish to find goodness, beauty and power in the oppressed or ridiculed and, by making those qualities known to the world, reveal the evils of western civilization. The Ik, the Mbuti, and Joseph Towles, were all Turnbull's creations. His visions of the world were so perfect, so true, so right for him, that they gave all the appearances of being real.

[Note: Photograph of Colin Turnbull in the Ituri Forest, 1951. Photographer unknown. Courtesy of the Avery Research Center.]

FURTHER READING

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