

I'd Rather be a Pygmie

An Essay on the State of Nature

by [Geoffrey Clarfield](#) (June 2025)



Photo by William F. Wheeler

Introduction

Are political philosophers wrong? Is or was the “state of nature” indeed violent, nasty, brutish and short? Or is it just possible that modern ethnography has proven that the 18th century political philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau was correct in arguing that civilization and hierarchy are not the natural condition of humans (an argument that has unfortunately been unfairly monopolized by the left).

I’d rather be a Pygmy, is an essay that explores the contrast between daily life in a large North American city and the life of Congolese Pygmies who maintained their culture and lifestyle in its traditional form until the Congolese Civil war exploded in the mid-nineties, changing the nature of that country forever.

Here I will several themes, all of which sometimes subtly and sometimes not so subtly ask the question, “Are we happy and can we be happy in a big modern city?” I will let the reader decide after we provide the evidence. It is sobering.

Section One – Sound

There is an enormous almost-Biblical absence in every large North American city. It is the absence of silence. Absence is everywhere and most perceptible in the downtown area of any city. Go to any downtown centre and what do you hear? The sound of cars accelerating and decelerating. Brakes that have not been serviced. The periodic roar of the subway below the street, the weather helicopters in the sky and the dull moan of millions of people, talking, walking. You can hear cell phones on speakers and very often music that is broadcast by shops on the street to passersby without headphones. Has it always been so?

No. In the cities of the world before the industrial revolution, the sounds of the city were those of animals, horses, donkeys, carriages, street criers and street musicians, artisans of all kinds and shop keepers and the marvelous cacophony of food markets. Go to Cairo, Istanbul, or Marrakesh. There you will hear an echo of these past times. Go into the towns that have none to little traffic or the covered bazaars or rural India and you will hear medieval life, cacophonous but human.

All of this is new. Cities and towns are no more than 12,000 years old in their preindustrial and industrial modes. And yet we as a species are at least 100,000 years old. What did we listen to before that?

We listened to the rain, snow, sleet, the sound of plants and trees played like musical instruments by the invisible wind. We heard birds and animals and the sounds of the daily round of nomadic camps. We heard people wake up and go to sleep, cook, drink tea, sing, dance, tell stories, talk, laugh, and argue. Those are the sounds that have characterized the daily life of Pygmies in the rainforests of Central Africa for more than thirty thousand years.

Listen and ask yourself. If given the choice, would you give up the noise of downtown for the sounds of the rainforest?

Section Two – Sight

It took me sixty years to get to the Congolese rainforest and spend time among the Pygmies. And when I arrived, I felt at home. Years earlier I had lived near it when I worked in the port town of Kigoma on the eastern Tanzanian side of Lake Tanganyika. I could see the forested mountains of Kivu region in eastern Zaire, just across the lake, home of the Ituri Pygmies. In those days I dreamt of hiring a pirogue and smuggling myself into a Pygmy clan to save them from civil war

and slaughter by their Bantu neighbors that was engulfing them. It was not to be.

In the rainforest the trees all around me are often over two hundred feet tall, and the tops of those trees form the upper canopy of the rainforest. Then there is the dense understory layer and the forest floor. Each level of the forest has its own unique flora and fauna.

For we puny humans on the ground, although the sun may be shining, we find ourselves in the shade, unless we visit one of the natural meadows which often appear out of nowhere, one of them being the homeland of the African baby elephant herds that I walked beside with my Pygmy guides and observed from a raised wooden platform.

The forest is home to these fabulous mutant elephants as well as antelopes of many kinds, threatened gorillas, pythons, chimps, bonobos, termites, slugs, crocodiles and many thousands of other known and unknown plants, trees, insects, and animals.

Pygmies have names for most of them and know the curative qualities of many plants unknown to modern science. This basic vocabulary may harken back to the original language of the Pygmies, thousands of years ago, before they adopted the languages of incoming Bantus and Nilotes. Some scientists believe that deep in the forest dinosaurs may survive.

Scientists have studied only one percent of plant life in these forests. In truth we know little about this kind of forest whose structure is millions of years old.

One Pygmy group from the forest of Gabon uses a psychedelic plant for their initiation ceremonies. Doctors are now adapting that plant to successfully treat the most untreatable drug addicts and alcoholics in Western countries.

Today the Pygmies of the rainforest are surrounded and

threatened by millions of encroaching Bantu speaking peasants, loggers, poachers, and violent independent militias, more than a hundred of them who are constantly raiding, fighting, and raping. Drug use and alcoholism are rampant among them.

Can the Pygmies provide the cure for the emptiness and hatred that drives their oppressors? Is the destruction of the rainforest whose wood provides building materials for houses for the middle classes of Europe and an emerging China, more valuable than, let us say, a plant that may cure cancer?

Section Three – Smell: City Air Does Not Make Free

When I lived in Manhattan I did not like the air. It did not smell right. It did not feel right. The only time it felt different was in Central Park, surrounded by trees or, when I drove my bike up and down the Hudson from my apartment near Washington Bridge. I could sometimes smell the breeze of the Hudson River.

In 2021, journalists Talor Gruenwald and Stephen Musheganwrote that:

New York State consumes more fossil fuels in its residential and commercial buildings than any other state in the country, and New York City's buildings are responsible for a significant portion of that consumption. In New York City, burning fuels for space and water heating accounts for [nearly 40 percent](#) of the city's total greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions ... fuel combustion in homes and businesses also contributes considerably to poor air quality, directly resulting in adverse health impacts and premature deaths—particularly among communities of color.

When space and water heating appliances such as furnaces

and boilers burn gas or oil to produce heat, they emit several dangerous pollutants. These include fine particulate matter ($PM_{2.5}$), oxides of nitrogen and sulfur (NO_x and SO_x), volatile organic compounds, and ammonia. These pollutants can cause asthma attacks, hospitalizations, and even premature death ... New York tops the list in terms of premature deaths and health impacts from fuel combustion in buildings, followed by Pennsylvania, California, Illinois, and New Jersey.

Then there is this strange research result that air pollution may increase violent behaviour. Wikipedia tells us that:

Although the environmental basis of violent behaviors is not well understood, scientists have been able to link [air pollution](#) to violent and aggressive behaviors in humans. A 2019 study reported emerging evidence that air pollution causes aggressive or impulsive reactions in people. The study was designed to estimate the change in violent and nonviolent criminal behavior risk associated with short-term air pollution in U.S. counties. The study used daily monitoring data for ozone from EPA, and [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) crime data, for 2002 to 2013. The study evaluated the exposure-response relation and assessed differences in risk by community characteristics of poverty, urbanicity, race, and age. The findings suggest that even a slight increase in air pollution can result in violent behavior, regardless of the community type.

In the rainforest I breathed easily. Everything smelled distinctive, the ground, the grass, the trees, the bushes, the insects, the animals, and the people. It all combined into a

palette of smells unique to the place. I did not cough or constantly clear my lungs. That was because I was living, although temporarily, in the lungs of the earth as if the Congolese rainforest were a gentle giant and I had somehow, like a character out of a Jules Verne novel, taken up residence inside it.

According to both local Muslim and Christian missionaries the pygmies are pagans who need to be led to the path of the one true God. The pygmies may have beat them to it for they almost believe in a benevolent God that created the universe back at the beginning of time.

From the moment I arrived in the forest I was living inside a living breathing organism, larger than everything around me. When I was finally seated in my plane that took me out of there, and back to New York City I saw the endless forest spread out before me. I could see for miles. As we gained altitude that feeling of wellbeing suddenly left me, never to return.

Section Four – Paleo Diet

I have been told that when you go to a supermarket to buy food, the only healthy items are on the outside walls. These are the fresh fruit and vegetables which come in from the countryside early in the morning, are deposited in large warehouses and then distributed to supermarkets where you can choose what you want.

These include the various meats, mostly beef, chicken as well as fish, which are popular. Then nearby you may have a choice of nuts and then an olive tray. As you move closer and closer to the centre of the supermarket, you can buy dried rice and pasta, bread, canned food, and other processed food. Then there are pastries, candies, chocolate bars, potato chips and a host of other foods.

You may not know it, but your supermarket is an expression of human evolution. It reflects three eras of human development. The fish, meat and nuts comprise the diet of our hunter gatherer ancestors who lived a protein rich life with no little carbs, artificial sugar, rice, or wheat.

Then there is the agricultural era which began five to seven thousand years ago whereby we ate olives and olive oil with which we used to cook more carbs, less meat, and nuts to survive under mostly tyrants of various kinds who argued that they ruled the majority by the divine right of God or Gods. In times of trouble they would get most of the food.

Finally, there is the industrial age with its preserved foods, doused in doubtful chemicals to keep them edible over time and which increasingly triggers food allergies in more of our children.

Anthropologists who have studied surviving modern hunter gatherers such as the Inuit, the Bushman and the Pygmies note that they follow the Paleo diet-fish, meat, wild fruit and nuts and wild honey when they get a sweet tooth.

So many of the diseases that we suffer from today, from hypertension to cancer, may somehow be connected to the second and third era foods that are so popular today, especially fried carbs and canned foods. The Pygmies know none of this and they are much healthier than we are.

When Coca cola vendors finally show up among them and tell them that "Coke tastes better," Pygmies may wisely ask, "Better than what?" Perhaps we really need to stop drinking soft drinks? Perhaps we should all be eating like Pygmies?

Section Five – 10,000 steps

When I was in the Congolese Rainforest, I did a lot of walking

and running too. There are only a few roads in the area, mostly used for logging. There were days when I would see lorry after lorry carrying the trunks of trees whose width astounding me, all for furniture in Europe and China. And so I knew I was getting my 10,000 steps a day, even more.

On a tour of forest elephants lead by Pygmy guides, they asked if I could run. I said, "Yes I can." And sure enough, a few minutes later I was told to do so to avoid the possibility of being charged by elephants. I ran like the wind for five minutes and I had a good cardiovascular workout.

I naively assumed that Pygmies were better walkers and runners than I because that is what they do all day, walk through the forest and then suddenly sprint when they are hunting the wild animals that remain there despite their massive and near systematic slaughter by encroaching Bantu workers who are often employed by the logging companies who seem intent on destroying the forest.

But there is more to Pygmy speed than I ever imagined. Let me quote a recent scientific study:

The hypothesis that Pygmies may differ from Caucasians in some aspects of the mechanics of locomotion was tested. A total of 13 Pygmies and 7 Caucasians were asked to walk and run on a treadmill at 4-12 km.h⁻¹. Simultaneous metabolic measurements and three-dimensional motion analysis were performed allowing the energy expenditure and the mechanical external and internal work to be calculated. In Pygmies, the metabolic energy cost was higher during walking at all speeds but tended to be lower during running ... the data from running ... suggest that Pygmies may differ in some aspects of the mechanics of locomotion.

I still try and walk 10,000 steps a day and use the elliptic to get the cardiovascular impact that my doctors recommend. And so I ask, "Have I evolved to walk and not run? "Have we changed since we left Africa? Most definitely.

Section Six – A Day in the Life

Today we live in a timeless and seamless world. Everything is happening all the time and unless we are asleep, we are expected to respond to every email or text message that we receive. Or, like dwellers in medieval castles we create "firewalls" which protect us from incoming messages. Even though we wake, drink coffee, work and socialize these are no longer sequential habits shared in real time by people with whom we live with, face to face.

Pygmies live in small settlements. Cheek by jowl. They make leafy huts and spend the night sleeping in close quarters. They wake up, some drink tea or coffee, some eat food from the day before and there is much talking. Some people, mostly the elderly, stay in camp.

As the day goes on physical, social, and ritual horizons broaden. Fully adult men and women go out into the surrounding forest to hunt animals and gather wild foods. An afternoon dance may take place spontaneously but probably more often after it gets dark. Although the calendar year is punctuated by rituals that are conducted during daylight it is in the evening when the elders will tell the new generation the tales of creation, stories about the ancestors and the root causes of things as explained in their folk tales.

Late at night everyone goes to sleep. Unless I have missed it, we do not know how Pygmies dream, but so many Pygmies who are musically inclined have told me that they dream up songs. These creations stay in their head as they wake up. They then teach others these songs before the day is done. As a musician

I have often woken up with a tune or a lyric. The ancestors of Pygmies are still telling me things. Perhaps I am fooling myself.

Section Seven – Families

My father died in his 99th year. He lived through the Great Depression. He was a WWII army veteran and rose up the ranks in the Canadian artillery at Halifax harbor. He married my Mom, and they produced three children.

He rose at six, went to work and came back at six. He worked hard and prospered. He was home every evening. He read me stories and taught me how to ride a bike. He took us to the cottage during summers and paid for our many extracurricular lessons and activities. He was a good, decent person and took an interest in his grandchildren.

But I did not see him for 80% of his time. Probably less but then it was daily, which was fine, as my siblings and I spent most of the day at school and on the streets in the early evening, throwing football, playing road hockey and bicycling.

Over the last 40 years, a lot of anthropologists have lived with and studied Pygmies. Based on that research, one organization has given Pygmy men the “best father in the world award.”

Here is what the new sites tell us about the Pygmies of the Congolese rainforest:

The Aka “Pygmies” have been named the world’s best fathers, dedicating the most time of all the globe’s peoples to active fathering, according to a new study. No fathers spend more time alone with their children than the average

Aka, now given the title “Best Dads in the World” by Fathers Direct, a British national information center on fatherhood. The Aka “Pygmies,” living in the border forests of Congo Brazzaville and the Central African Republic, are a hunting and gathering people.

On average, Aka fathers hold or are within arms’ reach of their infants 47 percent of the time—almost as much as Aka mothers. The results of the worldwide study by Fathers Direct were recently published in the Centre’s journal, *FatherWorld*.

Section Eight – Law and Justice

The US constitution tells us that all men are created equal. Let me quote the relevant passage:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

This is an excellent description of what anthropologists may call the guiding principles of Pygmy law. The reason that I say *may*, is that as anthropologists fanned out across the world to study tribal and traditional peoples, they have discovered that they had no law in the formal Anglo-American sense.

That it is to say no police, no judges, no formal law codes but instead most tribal people were governed by custom and a

rough but culturally specific notion of equality. Yes, there are occasional murders among Pygmy groups, but they are rare, and the offender is expelled for life from the community which is not so different from the European notion of life in prison for homicide or manslaughter. So how do Pygmies manage all other conflicts? Well they talk them through and very often the elders hear all sides of a conflict and then suggest compensation of some sort.

Let us go back to the US Declaration of Independence. Every time I read about it, I think about Pygmies. They behave in a way that every man and woman is free, that they are all equal under God. There is little conflict and, where there is, it is usually solved by moving away because the forest is so abundant.

In the 1700s and 1800s, Americans believed that their continent was infinitely abundant, and that conflict could be solved by moving the frontier to the near endless West. It is not widely known that American law land rights law emerged from the discussions of the poor immigrants and not from the government. The West was not wild, but fair. Gunslingers were the exception and not the rule.

Psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud once wrote that humans have collective memory. That is no longer popular. But is it not just possible that the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America is an intuitive, atavistic return to Pygmy law and morality? The founding fathers had read much travel literature and descriptions of tribal peoples. Should the morality of the Pygmies become the goal of a reformed legal system? It is worth considering.

Section Nine – Religion

During the 19th century, Europeans had great difficulty

penetrating Central Africa until they discovered that regular use of quinine could protect them from malaria. And so, the adoption of quinine during one's evening sundowner opened Central Africa to waves of missionaries. Catholic and Protestant missionaries were certain that Africans were pagans, that they were polytheists, in the grip of ancestral spirits and shamans which the missionaries called "witch doctors."

It took some time for missionaries who learnt the language and culture of the Pygmies and later anthropologists, to discover that Pygmies indeed had religion. That so many of them believed in God the creator and, like Jews, Christians, and Moslems in the Mediterranean and the Near East, believed that God was not alone. He has helpers among a myriad of secondary spirits and saints.

For the Pygmies, after creation, God had retired from his work and therefore much of Pygmy ritual and belief deals with stages in the life cycle and hard-to-understand relations with myriads of forest spirits whose forms are often embodied by men who dance in the village during rituals and who in some way embody these spirits.

Then there are the male and female initiation rites which imply belief in a spirit world as well as a diminished or even marginal belief in the sorcery and witchcraft beliefs that mirror or imitate the more pathological thoughts and practices of their agricultural Bantu hosts.

Anthropologists who have lived with the Pygmies write that their relation to God, the spirits, and the forest is fluid and benevolent. When things get out of balance there are, for example among the Ituri pygmies, the Molimo rituals that restore the harmony of the people with the forest that some anthropologists have argued is the true God of the Pygmies.

This argument began decades ago when a Catholic missionary

claimed, with much justification, that most Africans belief in a creator God and thus their religions could not be categorized as simply believing in myriads of spirits or are associated with the description of ritual objects that missionaries called “fetishes.”

Yes, the Pygmies believe in God, numerous spirits and some negative forces that cannot be expressed materially. But how different are we? Those us of us who still believe, believe in God or a complex trinity, in myriads of saints, in ghosts or paranormal phenomena. Some of these spirits are hostile to us and some we pray to.

Moderns are also plagued with a notion that we are either the beneficiaries of luck or fate, both good and bad. We are now not different from ancient polytheistic Greeks and Romans who felt that life and fate were arbitrary.

This is not the fate of Pygmies. Pygmies are not burdened with a concept of original sin. The missionaries who still live among them should pause and consider this paradox. I would for one would embrace and endorse a break in proselytization. But where does one start?

Section Ten – The Destruction of the Congolese Rainforest

Go onto the internet. Do a search for “Deforestation of the Congo.” You will find hundreds of up-to-date articles from a variety of web sites and news agencies. They will tell you variations of one theme. The Congolese rainforest is being cut down. It is diminishing.

Here is a quote from just one report:

- *Recent research links the U.S. demand for furniture made in China to tree cover loss in Africa’s Congo Basin.*

- *Between 2001 and 2015, China became the largest export market for timber from the Congo Basin, and over that same time period, the share of imports of furniture from China to the U.S. grew from 30 percent to 50 percent.*
- *The researchers suggest that public awareness campaigns aimed at curbing the demand for such furniture could be a boon for the Congo Basin's forests.*

And so what happens? Well outsiders must understand that Central Africa and its rainforests have been under threat for a long time. It is a resource rich part of the world with large uranium deposits as well as coltan mines which are essential for the working of our cell phones. Since the winds of change brought independence to Sub Saharan Africa in the early 1960s the governments of these countries have been ruled by Western educated elites from scores of mostly Bantu agricultural ethnic groups.

Mostly male politicians have been quick to realize that they are the stewards of vast resources desired by industrializing China and the West. They can be bribed and cajoled to allow for the short-term exploitation of their newly independent countries.

And they compete. One tribal elite fights the other for control of the state. Control of the state allows one to cut deals with foreign companies. Foreign companies will make you a well-paid and often "legal" member of their board or simply hand you large suitcases of US dollars which you can dispose of as you wish.

What can we do? Well we know that the Pygmies know more about the healing plants in the forest than we do so we can fund that research. That is in our immediate medical self-interest.

And we know that the employees of the World Bank and the IMF and the United Nations steal large chunks of the money that we as taxpayers give to them, to so call “manage the Congo” and its refugees. So we can ask our governments to stop funding these useless institutions and allow the Pygmies to maintain their land rights as they are the owners of the land and the guardians of the forest. United Nations corruption in the Congo is vast. And our taxpayer dollars support it. A bit of Western backed forensic accounting would go a long way to reduce it.

When I contemplate the life I lead, its conflicts, its health hazards its complexity, its stress, although I am lucky citizen of a Western democracy my soul tells me, “I’d rather be a Pygmy.” But I cannot be. It is not my fate.

But that should not stop you or I from doing everything that we can to let the Pygmies remain in and manage their forest. They may have the cure for so much of what ails us.

[Table of Contents](#)

Geoffrey Clarfield is an anthropologist at large. For twenty years he lived in, worked among and explored the cultures and societies of Africa, the Middle East and Asia. As a development anthropologist he has worked for the following clients: the UN, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Norwegian, Canadian, Italian, Swiss and Kenyan governments as well international NGOs. His essays largely focus on the translation of cultures.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)