

The Forager King

A celebrated anthropologist surprises and inspires his biographer

By BRUCE BOWER

Colin Turnbull led one of the most distinguished, unconventional, and controversial lives in the past century of anthropology. He effortlessly ingratiated himself to African foragers and Florida death row inmates—and just as easily infuriated professional colleagues.

In the 1950s, after undergraduate schooling in England and straight from a spiritual quest in India, Turnbull launched the study of African pygmies and wrote two bestselling books about them. Those books remain required reading in many high schools and colleges. By translating his fieldwork into vivid morality tales, Turnbull stepped into a worldwide spotlight of fame as what might be called a public anthropologist. Only a few others in his discipline, such as Margaret Mead and Louis Leakey, have gained more widespread recognition.

What's more, few anthropologists have shared Turnbull's skill at inciting passionate scholarly denunciations. Many critics disputed the objectivity and reliability of his field observations, foreshadowing current anthropological concerns about the ability of any fieldworker to rise above personal preconceptions and impartially describe another culture. Some anthropologists now view ethnography, or fieldwork in a local setting, as a type of storytelling rather than as science.

R. Richard Grinker is an anthropologist who sees ethnography as having more potential than being simple storytelling. Although he started out his career by dismissing Turnbull's work as biased and inadequate, Grinker has taken a closer look at the eminent anthropologist's life and emerged with a newfound respect for what Turnbull accomplished.

Grinker's transformation began in 1985, when he lived among central Africa's Efe pygmies and their farming neighbors, the Lese. Grinker hoped to demolish Turnbull's portrayal of forest-dwelling foragers as being isolated from the outside world and living in harmonious societies. Indeed, Grinker's research joined a growing body of literature on foraging groups that challenged Turnbull's conclusions, if not his book sales.

"I saw Turnbull's work as romanticized crap," Grinker says. "I was also jealous of his success in selling books."

By the time of Grinker's fieldwork among the pygmies, Turnbull had retired from academic life. In a twist of fate, Grinker had filled Turnbull's former post in the anthropology department at George Washington University in Washington, D.C.

There, Grinker began to learn about Turnbull's background from people who knew him well. His curiosity piqued, Grinker decided several years after Turnbull's death in 1994 to write a biography of his disdained predecessor.

As he combed through archives of Turnbull's letters and interviewed the anthropologist's surviving family, friends, and colleagues, a remarkable life began to take shape. Grinker's book *In The Arms of Africa: The Life of Colin M. Turnbull* (2000, St. Martin's Press) explores the complicated links between Turnbull's personal history and professional pursuits. Turnbull emerges as an exasperating charmer and a bold thinker. He made his share of mistakes, yet his work still offers valuable insights into both the nature of humanity and the practice of cultural anthropology, Grinker says.

"There's a willingness these days to do ethnography from a more personal viewpoint, as Colin did," says Robert Humphrey, the former head of George Washington University's anthropology department. He had hired Turnbull in 1976 and became his close friend and executor of his estate. "[Grinker] captured about as much of Colin as it's possible to do in a biography," Humphrey says.

In his writings and in discussions with colleagues and friends, Turnbull expressed no desire to be an objective scientist or mainstream scholar. He said that he wanted to find the goodness, beauty, and power in oppressed and ridiculed people and thus expose what he saw as the corrosive effects of Western civilization on the human spirit.

The seeds of that outlook, according to Grinker, were planted shortly after Turnbull's birth in 1924, as he grew up in a London suburb. Turnbull's mother, a forceful and often angry person, openly expressed her admiration of unusual people or societal outcasts derided by her other family members. At the same time, his parents entrusted young Turnbull's care to a series of nannies, none of whom stayed long enough to become close to him.

At 6 years of age, Turnbull was sent to a private boys' boarding school that his older brother, Ian, already attended. Turnbull later wrote that the school taught him "how to lie with only moderate success, how to cheat, and how to have zero confidence in adults and peers alike." Particularly disturbing was the sexual underworld at the school, in which some boys used sex with their peers to gain social status or to rebel against school authorities.

As a teenager at the boarding school, Turnbull experienced what Grinker calls a "pivotal moment" upon witnessing the gang rape of a friend. At that point, he became aware of desperately wanting to rescue victims of wanton power.

That ambition went largely unfulfilled during World War II. Turnbull entered the Royal Navy and helped sweep mines and recover the floating corpses of Allied soldiers who had been killed in coastline battles. In 1949, he finished his undergraduate degree at Oxford University.

From there he went to spiritual graduate school for 2 years, as one of the few Westerners to study in India with Sri Anandamayi Ma and Sri Aurobindo, two of the most famous 20th-century Indian saints. Imbued with a mix of Eastern and Western knowledge, Turnbull headed into Africa's Ituri Forest to meet the Mbuti pygmies.

In Africa, he and his friend Newton Beal stayed at a small outpost on the Epulu River that primarily served tourists. During that first excursion, Hollywood producer Sam Spiegel hired Turnbull and Beal to help build and transport the boat used in on-location filming for the movie *The African Queen*.

Turnbull visited the Mbuti on three separate trips during the 1950s. He and a cousin made recordings of Mbuti music for the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Seminal jazz artists such as John Coltrane cited Turnbull's Mbuti recordings as having influenced their musical styles, Grinker notes.

Turnbull's Mbuti work got him more than musical raves. In 1959 the American Museum of Natural History in New York City named him curator of African ethnology, although he wouldn't receive a graduate degree in anthropology until 1964.

Shortly before accepting the museum position, he had become engaged to an Indian woman but then ended the relationship. In New York, the 35-year-old curator fell in love with Joseph Towles, a 22-year-old African-American man from a poor Virginia family. The improbable partners lived together until Towles died of AIDS in 1988.

Turnbull didn't think of himself as homosexual, just as he didn't think of himself as British, Grinker says. He simply had come to realize that he preferred the close company of men to that of women.

In Towles, Turnbull found someone he wanted to teach and nurture into a distinguished anthropologist. Towles earned a doctorate in anthropology, yet it was Turnbull who hit the anthropological big-time.

The Forest People, an elegantly written book published in 1962, became an instant bestseller with its engaging descriptions of peaceful, spiritual Mbuti pygmies enjoying the Ituri Forest's bounties. To Turnbull, the Mbuti represented the best features of humanity. Their society

sharply contrasted with what he saw as Western civilization's emphasis on selfishness and war-like attributes.

Turnbull's scenario touched a nerve during politically turbulent times. It also bolstered the conviction of some anthropologists that foraging groups had survived in isolation long enough to serve as models of Stone Age behavior.

Other researchers, such as American Museum archaeologist James Ford, regarded the popular writings of Turnbull and his fellow museum curator Margaret Mead as unscientific. Moreover, Turnbull's openly homosexual relationship with Towles infuriated Ford.

Shortly before the publication of *The Forest People*, Ford masterminded an elaborate, phony correspondence with Turnbull about rare African idols allegedly offered for sale to the museum by an eccentric family that Ford had invented. The devious archaeologist simply wanted to harass and frustrate Turnbull, Grinker says.

A bad situation worsened in 1964. Ford fired off a nasty, nine-page letter about Turnbull and a host of other museum employees to the museum's director, who inadvertently allowed it to be read at a staff meeting. Eyewitness accounts gathered by Grinker recalled that Turnbull impassively scanned the letter without comment, despite its denunciation of his research, his homosexuality, and Towles.

"Colin was independent and inner-directed," recalls American Museum anthropologist Robert Carneiro, who worked at the museum during Turnbull's tenure and saw first-hand his muted reaction to Ford's letter. "I admired him very much for that."

Turnbull's independence soon got him into trouble, though. In 1965 and 1966, he did fieldwork in Uganda among the Ik (pronounced "eek"), a group of 2,000 short-stature hunters facing starvation and possible extinction. He catalogued all manner of atrocities within this group, such as gangs of youths stealing bits of food from the elderly and people tearing possessions off the bodies of their just-expired relatives.

The unabashed Mbuti booster became consumed by hatred of the Ik's behavior. In his 1973 book, *The Mountain People*, Turnbull portrayed the Ik as exemplars of human evil. Ecological disaster and starvation had stripped away Ik culture and left the people mired in a brutal endgame of self-interest, he argued, a state of affairs to which residents of Western countries could easily plummet.

Turnbull wanted to protect the Ik people by destroying their society. He recommended splitting up families and relocating random groups, each of about 10 individuals, to isolated parts of Uganda.

The Mountain People became another bestseller. Its radical assertions also attracted fierce criticism from anthropologists. For many, Turnbull had crossed the line from scientific description into fiction, imputing motives to the Ik that he couldn't have known and painting a crude caricature of a starving people.

For instance, Fredrik Barth of Boston University wrote in 1974 that Turnbull's book "deserves both to be sanctioned and to be held up as a warning to us all." He decried its lack of evidence for any lost Ik cultural traditions on the basis of the group's oral history or on any source other than Turnbull's opinion. Barth also criticized Turnbull on ethical grounds for publishing names and photographs of Ik who had stolen cattle or engaged in other illegal acts.

However, the book sparked productive debate, Grinker says. It compelled researchers to question whether they should tolerate all human behaviors as valid cultural expressions and to ponder whether concepts such as human rights and economic development should be applied globally. These issues remain much discussed today.

From 1974 to 1976, Turnbull helped British director Peter Brook produce a well-received stage version of his book about the Ik. The project underscored Turnbull's conviction that

anthropology can be art as well as science. After viewing the play, Turnbull told Brook that it had helped him see the Ik's humanity and how nasty a person he had become among them.

A chastened Turnbull then pursued a study of legal and ethical issues surrounding the death penalty in the United States. He befriended numerous death-row inmates in Florida and worked to overturn their death sentences.

In 1982, Turnbull retired from teaching to care for Towles, who had started to act erratically and appeared emotionally distraught. When Towles died in 1988, Turnbull held a double funeral, saying that the second coffin contained his own spirit, which had perished with his partner.

He devoted the rest of his life to Buddhist studies. In 1992, the Dalai Lama ordained Turnbull as a Buddhist monk in India. Two years later, Turnbull died of AIDS in a Virginia hospital.

Grinker still disagrees with Turnbull's descriptions of the Mbuti and the Ik. Recent evidence indicates that the Mbuti and other tropical foragers work closely with nearby farmers in what amount to complex societies (SN: 7/1/00, p. 8). For their part, the Ik have begun to rebound from past food shortages and more clearly exhibit a cultural tradition that was never starved into submission, according to both Grinker and Carneiro.

On the other hand, Turnbull's fearlessness, stubborn independence, and ability to mix personal with professional interests struck a deep chord in his biographer. Other accomplished but lesser-known ethnographers—some from well before Turnbull's time—possessed the same traits, asserts anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

Their contributions illustrate the need for anthropologists to reinvigorate ethnographic work rather than turn their backs on it, as increasingly seems to be the case, Mintz says in the April CURRENT ANTHROPOLOGY.

Consider James Mooney, an ethnographer with no academic training who more than 100 years ago launched a landmark study of Native American religious practices. Mooney, who wrote a classic 1896 book on the Sioux Ghost Dance religion, took an intense personal interest in the plight of Native Americans and developed close friendships with many of those he studied.

His passionate defense of the rights of Indians to use peyote in their religious ceremonies earned him enemies in the federal government's Bureau of Ethnography, which sponsored his work. In 1918, the bureau denied him permission to continue his Native American fieldwork.

Mintz approvingly cites a quote that Mooney gave to a reporter in 1893: "Unless you live with people, you cannot know them. It is the only way to learn their ideas and study their character."

That doesn't mean that insightful fieldwork comes easily. Colin Turnbull, for one, made what Grinker and others view as crucial mistakes in his portrayals of the Mbuti and the Ik.

Yet, in Grinker's view, Turnbull left a legacy of passionate engagement with the daily lives of far-flung peoples that today's anthropologists can celebrate and build on. □