

TRACKING FATHER ELEPHANT

date unknown

Gabon Pygmies

Traditionally, the Gabon Pygmies of west central Africa relied on hunting and gathering for their food supply. While some members of their society gathered vegetables, others set out to hunt game. Hunters tracked all sorts of wild game, including the massive elephant. The following poem tells the story of a hunter's pursuit of an elephant for food.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Making Inferences

What does this traditional poem of the hunt suggest about the life and values of the Gabon Pygmy?

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the weeping forest, under the wing of the evening
the night all black has gone to rest happy:
in the sky the stars have fled trembling,
fireflies shine vaguely and put out their lights:
above us the moon is dark, its white light is put out.
The spirits are wandering.

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the frightened forest the tree sleeps, the leaves are dead,
the monkeys have closed their eyes, hanging from the branches above us:
the antelope slip past with silent steps,
eat the fresh grass, prick their ears,
lift their heads and listen frightened:
the cicada is silent, stops his grinding song.

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the forest lashed by the great rain
Father elephant walks heavily, *baou, baou*,
careless, without fear, sure of his strength,

TRACKING FATHER ELEPHANT

Father elephant, whom no one can vanquish:
among the trees which he breaks he stops and starts again:
he eats, roars, overturns trees and seeks his mate:
Father elephant, you have been heard from far.

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

In the forest where no one passes but you,
hunter, lift up your heart, leap and walk:
meat in front of you, the huge piece of meat,
the meat that walks like a hill,
the meat that makes the heart glad,
the meat that we'll roast on our coals,
the meat into which our teeth sink,
the fine red meat and the blood we drink smoking.

Elephant hunter, take your bow!
Elephant hunter, take your bow!

Source: "Tracking Father Elephant," translated by C. M. Bowra, in *Primitive Song* by C. M. Bowra (New York: World Publishing, 1962). Copyright © 1962 by C. M. Bowra.