Travels among Uganda's misrepresented *IK* people

The Ik people were once widely considered among the most diabolical in the world. **Mark Eveleigh** travelled to their mountain stronghold in far northern Uganda and made some unforgettable new friends.

"You have to be tough to survive here," an old man told me, "Sometimes witches bring curses to make you weak. They ride on hyenas and whoop around the village to make you die faster."

I had only been among the Ik people for a couple of hours but anything seemed believable.

Mzee Mateus Yeya Acok, a headman in Uganda's most mysterious tribe, was sitting outside the hyena-proof stockade that surrounds Nalemoru, which means simply 'village on a highpoint' in Ik. Perched on a wind-swept ridge high over Uganda's beautiful Kidepo Valley, Nalemoru is well named.

In 1972, the Ik became famous in a book called ***The Mountain People*** by Oxford-educated anthropologist Colin Turnbull. According to Turnbull, daily life among the Ik seemed to be a constant series of almost unbelievable atrocities: teenagers gleefully stole food directly from the mouths of the starving elderly, a mother celebrated when a predator relieved her of the responsibility of caring for her child, grandparents joyfully watched a baby crawl into a fire... It made powerful reading and at the time, it shook the world of travel literature.

Images of Turnbull's brutal characters flickered through my brain as Kidepo Valley National Park ranger Phillip Akorongimoe parked his Landcruiser and we began our climb up Morungole Mountain, with two AK47-toting troopers from the Uganda People's Defence Forces. While things have been peaceful since the disarmament that took place when I last travelled to the region in 2008, there are still regular patrols in this area, which borders Northern Kenya and South Sudan.

'Morungole was considered sacred,' wrote Turnbull, 'I had noticed this by the almost reverential way with which the Ik looked at it - none of the shrewd cunning and cold appraisal with which they regard the rest of the world...'

Within an hour of climbing, I was struggling to remind myself that 50 years after those words were written, I was on my way to a rendezvous with the "nastiest" people in the world. This was particularly hard to imagine because ***Mzee*** Hillary, a 64-year-old Ik man with a charmingly open smile and a chatty demeanour, had joined our little convoy to guide us to his highland home.

As we trekked, he pointed out the sacred fig trees where animal sacrifices are made to bring rain and he showed me shady copses where wild honey is collected to be used in Ik marriage ceremonies. There were groves of medicinal bushes that serve as a natural pharmacy, treating everything from earache, to constipation, to scorpion stings. We were joined by a group of Ik women and children carrying water from the stream. They seemed determined to fill every minute of the three-hour walk with happy chatter and laughter and I wondered if these people could really be the same tribe that Turnbull travelled among for almost two years, complaining that his efforts to understand them were constantly frustrated by their moody silence. Back then the Ik still lived in the lowlands and although Turnbull tried to convince guides to take him to the peak, he never visited Morungole and describes it in his book as 'a dark mass, always hidden in haze'.

"I was no closer to solving the mystery of the British anthropologist's bitter relationship with the tribe..."

Our trail was along a narrow ridge, and it seemed that if I threw a stone out over the great sweeping curve of Kidepo Valley, it would almost land in South Sudan. About 30 miles away in the other direction lay the Turkana country of Northern Kenya. Over the centuries, the Ik had become accustomed to persecution from all sides: they were trapped between warlike tribes such as the Toposa and Didinga of Sudan and at the mercy of cattle-crazed Turkana warriors from Kenya.

"We would buy cattle from the Turkana, but they would follow us home and steal them back. During these raids, many Ik often died," one old man told me.

"It was like a deadly game of football," my guide Phillip explained. "Sometimes the different tribes played at home. Sometimes they played away. And always the Ik were caught in the middle."

The misty summit rose steeply against gathering storm clouds when we finally reached the Ik's highest village. The thatched roofs of the bandas (huts) were barely discernible behind the thorny stockade that protects the precious goats from leopards and raiders... and protects the people from hyena-mounted witches. ***Mzee*** Paulino Lukuam greeted me with an exchange of the triple-grip handshake that is habitual among many African people. I knew that it had taken Colin Turnbull a long time before he'd been allowed to see inside a village, so I was surprised when ***Mzee*** Lukuam invited me into his private compound within minutes of meeting. I had to crouch to crawl through the low door into the round mud-and-thatch banda (which measured about three metres in diameter). I'd read that Ik parents evict their children to sleep outside, curled like dogs, from the age of three, but ***Mzee*** Lukuam and his wife shared their little hut with seven children.

"Ik culture has never been infiltrated by Western ways," Phillip told me as we ducked through the asak - the low tunnel out of the family compound. "They're still proud of a culture which has remained untainted. A unique thing about the Ik compared with other tribes in this area, is that there is virtually no sex outside marriage for women. Most will only ever sleep with one man in their lives."

I wondered how this tradition could have remained alive when, according to Turnbull's experiences when he lived here from 1965-66, Ik women "regarded their bodies as their greatest assets in the game of survival". I was no closer to solving the mystery of the British anthropologist's bitter relationship with the tribe.

The Ik have been surrounded by mystery for thousands of years. Nobody is sure

where they originated but linguists have noted similarities between the Ik language and speech from southern Egypt. I'd heard mystifying rumours that their language was peppered with words that sounded Latin and Phillip had told me that some Spanish travellers he'd brought here were even able to decipher occasional words. I questioned old ***Mzee*** Acok in Spanish with no success whatsoever, but finally he was able to explain the mystery: apparently an Italian Catholic Priest called Father Florence had lived among the Ik in the '60s and '70s and had left many words behind including a tradition of Christian names.

When Kidepo Valley National Park was gazetted in 1958, the British colonial government forced the Ik to stop their traditional hunting and move to the foothills. By the early 1980s, pressure from neighbouring tribes, along with drought and famine, forced the Ik to take to the peak of their sacred mountain. The Ik, now dwindled to a total population of about 10,000, have retreated as far as they can possibly go.

Only once did the Ik take Turnbull close to Mount Morungole - to what they called their 'Place of God': '...the Ik had become increasingly uncommunicative,' he wrote. 'Never again would they take me near that place, or talk about it. But, as little as I knew, I felt that for a brief moment I had made contact with an elusive reality, a reality that was fast retreating beyond Ik consciousness.'

Mzee Acok was a young man when Colin Turnbull came to visit and remembers the anthropologist (who died in 1994). When I showed him a copy of ***The Mountain People,*** he was excited to recognise some old friends in the aged black-and-white pictures.

I didn't mention the contents of the book, but: "I heard that he wrote some impolite things about us," the old man said. "If Turnbull ever came back, I would simply tell him, 'Please. There is no business here that we are going to welcome you for. Please leave us and go home.'"

Mzee Acok is now almost 90 years old and believes that he has been blessed with a long life because as a boy and young man, he always obeyed his parents. As he spoke, the younger people and children huddled around us, listening to the old man's reminiscences in respectful silence.

"When I was a boy, we would sit on the plains staring at the peaks of Morungole with its colobus monkeys and great stores of wild honey," he said. "Now we sit on Morungole shivering in the cold, gazing over the savannah far below with the endless game that is now forbidden to us. Life has always been hard for the Ik but we're tough. Times will keep changing but in another thousand years, there will still be Ik on Morungole Mountain."

Get in the know:

- The Ik believe that Morungole's 2,759m peak is the domain of their all-powerful god Didigwari.
- Kidepo Valley National Park boasts 500 bird species and 86 mammals (28 can be found nowhere else in Uganda).
- Uganda's remotest reserve, the 1,442sq. km Kidepo is often described as Africa's most beautiful national park.
- Neighbouring tribes have such faith in the Ik's rain-calling abilities that they hire them to make the necessary animal sacrifices.
- Tobacco and wild honey are considered an indispensable part of the bride price in Ik marriages.

Great Lakes Safaris (*www.greatlakessafaris.com*) can arrange a four-night Kidepo safari with road transfers - expect an 11-hour drive from Entebbe International Airport. Apoka Safari Lodge (*apoka@wildplacesafrica.com*) can arrange visits - a three to four hour trek each way - to the Ik's highland villages.