

Expert Profile

Name: Marius Billy, Director Afrique Profonde

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www.afriqueprofonde.org

Marius Billy is a musician from Ingoumina, a small village in the southern forests of the Congo-Brazzaville. Marius has spent the last decade of his life to fighting for one of the most neglected indigenous peoples in the world--the Pygmies of Central Africa. As a member of the Batéké clan which spreads across Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Gabon, he has observed his own people discriminating against their Pygmy neighbours as long as he can remember. Marius plans to stop this and put an end to outside pressures such as globalization and logging, disease, servitude forced by Bantu farmers, civil war and cannibalism inflicted by rebel soldiers. The Pygmies' forest homes and lifestyles are in threat of extinction in the near future.

As a researcher, musician and Director of Afrique Profonde, an organization committed to equal rights for the Pygmies in Africa and the preservation of their unique cultures, Marius has been working diligently to make the Pygmies' story known. His vision is to help restore dignity for the Pygmies, end the discrimination, develop education and health programs to ensure the continuation of their population and culture, and to have the Pygmies' voices be heard in the dialogue of globalization.

From his personal experience as a musician and researcher living among the Babongo Pygmies of southern Congo, he has seen the wealth of knowledge held by these people and the valuable lessons they have to offer about nature, community, music, religion, and peace. Marius is dedicated to helping the governments of the Central African countries, which host several distinct clans of Pygmies, to realize they are sitting on a cultural gold mine. In order to do this, he is calling on the "free world" to learn about the Pygmy culture and to demand the respect for Pygmies through supporting his organization.

Marius' interest and love for Pygmies began when he was a young boy in school. Marius Billy grew up wondering why the Pygmies were neglected and isolated by his society and living servitude to Bantu peoples.

The discrimination of the Pygmies by the Bantu people stretches back to the beginning of Sahara desertification. Later, through the colonial times and again during independence, authorities called upon the Babongo and other Pygmies groups to come out the forest and join the rest of Congo people and to stop isolating themselves. The Pygmies did not completely make this move as they did not understand why they had to leave their natural homes to join people they did not even know. To Pygmies, the forest is their lifeline and their god.

During his years as a student of psychology at Marien Ngouabi University, in 1990 Marius had the opportunity to tour with a musical group in Europe and Africa. This experience showed him the interest people had in traditional African music and culture

outside of Africa. After finishing his degree in psychology, Marius dedicated himself to finding the roots of African music. In his search, he realized that most of the local television, radio stations, and libraries in Congo had very little traditional music—most of it was imported. He realized back then that many African people had lost respect for their own culture, and his search also led him back to the forests where ancient rhythms and traditions are still alive with Pygmies.

After spending several months living and playing music with Pygmies, it was very clear to him that their culture would not last another decade if he didn't do something. A Pygmy elder, Mbou, charged Marius with the responsibility of keeping their fire alive—a charge he has not taken lightly and has even nearly lost his life for on several occasions. In addition to organizing a band of Pygmy musicians called “Silambam” (“Live with my Fire”) for cultural festivals to share Pygmy music and culture with people in the city of Pointe-Noire, Marius started *Afrique Profonde* in collaboration with a musician from the United States and a designer from Mexico. *Afrique Profonde* is a member of *Res Artis* and the *Alliance of Artist Communities*—both networks of international artist-in-residence programs.

Afrique Profonde, which was launched as an artist residency program in the beginning of 2002, is developing initiatives to support the freedom and culture of Pygmies throughout Africa. The organization plans to raise money for education, health care, and sustainable development work for Central African Pygmies through international music tours, artist residency programs, study abroad programs, an online archive of Pygmy cultural information, and the sale of indigenous artwork, music, books, and materials from deep Africa.

Marius Billy is a rare link between the Western world, the Governments in Africa, non-governmental organizations, and the mysterious world of the Pygmies. And because he has been taking action in the face of huge obstacles, he is one of very few outsiders that the Pygmies trust and respect. Marius is currently pursuing a masters in ethnomusicology in Stockholm to better archive Pygmy culture while continuing to speak at seminars and workshops about his research and the situation facing the Pygmies today.

According to Marius, “Deep Africa is a world in itself, a world apart that very few people from other countries have ever seen. The Pygmies of deep Africa hold many ancient and important lessons to share with the global community. *Afrique Profonde* would like to serve as a gateway to deep Africa, to the Pygmy peoples, and to the harsh and beautiful environment in which these peoples are trying to survive. As long as there is still at least one human being living in poverty, inequality, and without a voice, no one in the world is truly free.”