Travels in the Congo

A.Gide

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Gide is traveling in the darkest recesses of Africa. Whether as a private citizen or as an official representative is not clear from his report. Officially, it was on some official fact-finding mission, and I suspect that this was also the way the excursion that lasted almost a year, was financed. But from his approach one suspects that it was more of a private indulgence of old phantasies than a regular commission.

The book is written as a diary, and one suspects with very little final editing. This of course makes for freshness and immediacy, but also a certain amount of tedium. When you are traveling for a very long time, one day merges with the next and it is often hard in retrospect to tell them apart, as well as finding significant events worthy of written notice while you are recalling a day spent. It all accumulates, as we know, and only makes sense after a long time of digestion.

The itinerary of the trip is carefully laid out on a map, supplied with the Penguin edition[1]. It takes Gide to the mouth of the Congo River, after a lengthy sea voyage from Europe, with many a visit along the Atlantic coast of Africa. That preliminary sea-faring phase of the journey is not part of the narrative, nor is the concluding one setting off from Douala in Cameroon. The inland phase involves going north along the Congo and its tributaries, then proceeding with cars until the roads are no longer passable. Further exploration involves the hiring of porters to carry all the loads necessary. Gide and his companions are carried in so called *Tipoyes*, which are seats suspended from poles carried on the shoulders or heads of porters. Gide avoids it as much as possible, and does most of his transportation by his own locomotion, partly because of the inconvenience and discomfort, the chair sways a lot making reading impossible, and partly because of a bad conscience visavi the porters. In this way the party makes nevertheless a lot of headway, passing through the present Central African Republic, then up into Chad and all the way to Lake Chad, in whose environs the expedition stays for an extended time, before slowly heading south along rivers down into French Cameroon, before motorized land travel becomes possible again, and the last legs of the journey is processed at lightening speed.

The trip takes place in 1925-26. This is a few years after the First World War, the result of which had expelled Germany as a colonial power in Africa, and led to a division of the spoils by the two major colonial players on the continent, namely England and France. Two powers which in particular had subdivided the German colony of Kamerun. At the time Colonialism, which came relatively late to the African continents, was at its height, and there was little expectation that it would not last for a very long time, maybe even indefinitely. Africa in the 1920's was a very exotic destination, and tourists were more or less unheard of, especially as far as the interior parts were concerned, so Gide encounters in

[1] This is a so called Penguin Travel Library edition, which is a translation of two books *Voyage au Congo* and *Le Retour du Tchad*.

this way virgin territory. Except for officials, missionaries and traders, there are no white people around[2]. Gide himself, born in 1869, is not exactly a young man, turning 56 during the trip. Still he seems to be in excellent physical shape, and suffers little discomfort during ordeals which no doubt would have severely tried younger men. True, he suffers from the heat in the spring, when the temperature is at its highest in the northern equatorial Africa, but so does the Natives as well. Remarkably he is not seriously stricken with any disease, although disease is rampant in the jungle. Apart from pneumonia and other infectious diseases, there is the sleeping sickness carried by the tse-tse fly, indigenous in the regions into which Gide is penetrating, and also a variety of recurrent fevers, not to mention all the parasites and worms that attack the human body. There are brief mentions of the tse-tse fly as being very harassing, impossible to kill or drive away. As to wild life, there is not too much, and what there is, does not really present a serious threat. Gide is reminded to keep windows closed during the nights because of Panthers, but none is seen. Once they encounter a lion on an island in the river Lagone, but its presence provokes far more curiosity than fear. Gide is at first disappointed in the paucity of crocodiles, but reassured later on when he sees them in the hundreds. Crocodiles too, due to their lethargy provide no serious threat to their well-being. The most exciting encounters with big animals is one with a number of hippos. He refers to them as monsters, and one of them is actually killed, and then with great difficulty retrieved and cut up for its hide and meat, providing a horrible stench as to make the whale boat in which he is traveling almost impossible as an abode. On the other hand the most dangerous animals in the tropics are, apart from mosquitoes, snakes, but Gide reports no close encounters with such. Against the advice of his traveling companion, Gide takes bath in rivers and lakes, provided the water is clear enough, and find the experience exhilarating, referring to the rapture he feels when plunging into its cool transparency. Gide would live on for almost a quarter of a century after the trip, and cannot thus have suffered too deeply from its potential aftereffects. True, Gide does not escape completely, but is affected by some bouts of fever at times. He writes that during the moments of respite between two attacks there is almost a voluptuous feeling. The mere sensation of being alive and existing is delicious.

What interests Gide the most? The most exciting aspect of a trip into exotic territory is of course the flora and the fauna. Gide shows himself to be a competent and dedicated naturalist. He is an avid collectors of butterflies and other insects, and he notes and comments knowingly on trees and flowers, making intermittent comparisons with French landscapes. In his collection mania he branches out and even takes to shooting, something he does not seem to have tried before in his life, and seems somehow out of character. In particular he is very proud of his first shot at a big bird, bringing it down. The experience would be a mixed one, and not usually repeated. Further on in his travels he remarks that certain birds let themselves to be approach so closely that it seems a shame to fire. What really intrigues him is the jungle, but apart from the very last he encounters on his way out, he finds many of the forests disappointing. Sometimes the trees are far bigger than those you encounter in Europe, and that is of course very exciting[3]. Exciting are also the

[2] There are also Arabs, but their presence is not really acknowledged, maybe because they are seen as a variant of the Native population.

[3] As a reader one wonders how the giant African trees compare with the Sequoias and Redwoods of

forms plants, which in Europe are restricted to the potted variety, assume in their wild and natural states. Gide is particular intrigued by the ficus, which in the African jungle, takes the form of a large tree, starting out as a parasite on other trees. He is also very surprised by finding wild bananas, which he thought were indigenous to Central America. One particular aspect of his naturalistic interest, is the touching attachment he forms to a *Perodicticus potto*. Although Gide is at first under the impression that it is a kind of sloth, it is in fact a primate, and referred to as a 'Dinkini' by the Natives, the name of which the author adopts for his pet. This creature is mentioned intermittently through the books, and expires at the very end of the journey. It is a nice pet, but as many loyal pets somewhat exasperating, but Gide indulges its whims.

Gide is also a writer, of course, and in spite of hardships and tedium he does keep up his journal. Concomitantly he is reading, having brought with him a number of books, presumably a mini-library. He reads Goethe in German, both *Wahlverwandtschaften* and the second part of *Faust* and he quotes occasionally from them. He reads Stevenson as well as classical French drama and dispenses judgements. The occasions to indulge in such interests are not that many, after all there is little opportunity while on the move, and during nocturnal interludes, he tends to be rather exhausted, and there is a perennial difficulty to find light to boot. But of course conditions vary under an extended trip. Towards the end of the journey, when he has become accustomed to slowness, he confesses that he has never read better or more rapturously. The monotonous landscape soothing the mind without distracting it. Thus it may not be surprising that he manages an impressive list nevertheless. A crucial book is Conrad's 'Heart of Darkness' which he reads four times and concludes that you can only fully appreciate its greatness when you have been to country yourself, and seen everything with your own eyes. Not surprisingly Gide dedicates his book to the memory of Conrad.

But reading on travel is normally a distraction bordering on theft. After all as Gide notes, there is something magical with first impressions, because of the element of surprise they entail, and which can never be repeated, no matter how hard the mind tries. Objectively the beauty may remain, but, as he writes, the virginity of the eye is lost. It is also in character, that when Gide makes any of the above mentioned comparisons with French or other well-known landscapes, it is almost always to the detriment of the African. But when it reminds him of nothing he is able to find it marvelous. And here Gide points to something essential about the art of travel, that of seeing things for the first time. If it is also objectively true, i.e. that things are first seen by intelligent eyes, as by an explorer (then of course native eyes are discounted), the merely private experience is exalted and assumes importance. But of course, this is not necessary for the purely private sensation, and that is what counts for most. Surprise is as difficult to convey as it is to recall, and thus in a travel report, the most enduring and intimate experiences are usually never transmitted. To travel is to continually recall the wonder and magic of mere existence.

The most interesting thing for the outside reader in general is of course what Gide makes out of the Natives. There is of course a gulf that separates the white man from the Natives who mostly live in abject poverty and share no language with the traveler, nor yields any power. Gide is repeatedly put off by the dirt and the stench amidst men-

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the American West.

tal apathy. He finds conditions wretched and sordid and gives vent to his exasperation, occasionally referring to human cattle. Under such circumstances it is not natural to except a communion on equal terms. Gides opinions of the Natives would not pass muster with modern racial sensibilities. In the privacy of his journals, he dismisses the Natives as being of a primitive race, unable to reason logically and abstractly, capabilities which are encoded in the very language of the white races. Incidentally, I guess Gide would be inclined to give French pride of place in that respect. More specifically he claims that as a rule the Natives do not understand the word 'why' and instead replaces it with 'how', making him both to conjecture that their brains are unable to establish a connection between cause and effect and that their languages lack such necessary words[4]. This is not a single spontaneous reflection, but one that he is constantly reminded of during his whole journey. Furthermore he is exasperated by their clumsiness and stupidity when undertaking anything new, however simple it might be; thinking that they ought to show more ingenuity when it comes to such tasks, living so close to nature as they do. As a result the Natives are looked on with detachment.

Gide is no stranger to physical beauty, especially not of the male kind, and he is also far from being indifferent to the allure of female flesh. The fact that most Natives walk around essentially naked, make the opportunities for such observation to be continually available, and also adds to the impression that the Native may be oversexed, a myth that seems to have been very prevalent at the time, and to be honest, still very much remains so[5]. Gide spots some women working on a road, remarking that their faces are ugly but their busts admirable. Of one woman that is brought to his attention in a conflict between his Portuguese cook and a guard, he remarks that she was very 'Eve-like', in fact very 'eternal-feminine' and definitely handsome, if one makes allowance for her sagging breasts. She stands before him, her arms raised with no garment on except some leaves held in place by a bead girdle. He notes approvingly the purity and beauty of the curve traced by her hips and legs. In the end she is rejected by both warring parties as too much of a whore to their liking. Other signs of sexual attraction put him off, such as the custom of women extending their lips with plates. This is an aberration he finds most disconcerting, with no explanation and excuse. Those unfortunate women, with saliva constantly dripping from their deformed lips look stupid but not unhappy, laugh and sing and seem completely unaware that they are not captivating[6]

Consequently when Gide arrives at Fort Archabault and encounters Islam, he experiences relief. He is out of Hell and has left barbarism behind. Islamic culture may be

[4] He does concede that the stupidity of the Natives may only be apparent as they may involve a different kind of logic, not the one encoded in our languages, and which we westerners thus cannot escape. In his footnotes he refers to one Levy-Bruhl as an authority on such matters.

[5] During the 80's the rapid spread of HIV in sub-Saharian Africa was regularly attributed to sexual license.

[6] How much of sexual attraction is innate and how much due to social convention. These women may not be captivating to Gide, but nevertheless so to the men who matter. Gide later on makes a reference to a young girl who has been forbidden by her father to have her lips customarily extended, but plans to do so, when he is away, despairing that unless she submits to the fashion she will not be married. It is hard not to think of her as a modern teenager eager to join the social crowd.

rudimentary, he notes, but it is still a species of civilization, in which there is a comprehension of nobility, a disinterested spirituality and a feeling for what is immaterial. Here, he reports, there are real homes, specialization, individual possessions. In short Islam brings with it a foretaste of the West.

But his high-handed view of the mental capacities of the Natives does not prevent him from feeling a deep sympathy for them as well as empathy for their plight. This is of course by itself not remarkable, we tend to do it all the time for animals, whose intellectual level we have no illusions about but whose capacity for suffering we are willing to raise to almost human levels. Gide is aghast at the way the Natives are treated by traders. How they are constantly being abused and put in their place. No wonder that they live up to the expectations of their masters, he reflects. Indeed, if treated with suspicion and contempt, surely they will show themselves worthy of it. If instead they are treated with kindness and understanding, they will repay in kind, he concludes. He refers to downtrodden races, maybe not intrinsically vile in themselves but made vile by others. Constantly during his travels he marvels at their loyalty and fortitude. He is repulsed by the harsh treatment they are often subjected to by cruel and corrupt officials, and in the beginning of his trip, reports reach him of forceful recruiting to rubber plantations, low wages and cruel and unjust punishments in the form of hands being chopped off or down-right executions. But what to do? He is fired with indignation and wishes that he was a journalist and not just a literary writer, so that his words may reach wider audiences and penetrate deeper into the corridors of power. He is adamant that the culprits should be brought to the attention of officials and ultimately to justice. However, his indignation subsides, not much more is heard of it as his travels continue, and is reduced to a low murmur of a distant thunderstorm raging beyond the horizon, incidentally a meteorological event of which he would have a lot of experience during his sojourn in the middle of Africa. His trip to the Congo, may have opened his eyes to the abuses of colonialism, but its overriding theme is not the exposure of misdeeds. True, his official report later on resulted into colonial reform, and in this regard he drew his straw to the amelioration of colonial rule, but probably not in any radical way[7]. His views on the prevalent prejudices are admirably put forward in a mere footnote. He refers to dinner companions, who remark that no women is really pious before the age of forty, that their views on Negroes do not raise above their ignorance of women. He continues philosophically, that experience rarely teaches us anything. In fact a man uses everything he comes across to strengthen him in his own opinion and sweeps everything into his net to prove his convictions. In fact, he claims, that no prejudice is so absurd that it cannot find confirmation in experience. This is a forceful rejection of the Baconian view of science as based on unadulterated experience. There is no such thing. The world does not instruct us, it only sets limits to our actions.

Nevertheless, Gide's championship of the Negroe cause may seem condescending in view of his dismissal of Native intelligence. He consistently refers to their childlike innocence, in addition to their purity, nobility and honesty. Yet it comes out of a fundamental decency lying deeper than that of mere social convention, and as such it certainly has been influential in the slow change of public pinion that has taken place in the decades following

[7] Gide was not opposed to colonialism per se, but thought that more infusion of resources and money would solve the problems, as well as a more humanitarian attitude.

his visit. One should also keep in mind that his jottings are intended for a diary, where the immediacy and freshness of a reflection is at a premium when it comes to formulation, and thus consistency will invariably suffer. After all his views are to be thought of as tentative, as all views are, and are constantly being confronted with reality. As noted, he has little respect for the prevalent attitudes and notes that when a white man gets angry with the black's stupidity it is usually his own foolishness that he displays. Furthermore the issue of racism is a subtle one. One may question whether there is such a thing as individual racism, and if so, whether it is of any real concern. Racism as expressed by the individual is a species of prejudice, and prejudices are usually to the detriment of those who hold them as opposed to them who are subjected to them. Thus I believe that racism should be thought in collective terms. An individual is entitled to his opinions, however badly founded, while a government is different. One may with a different kind of urgency and indignation speak about racial laws as opposed to racial opinions. It is telling that racism seems to have no biological foundation, not only are very child able to perfectly acquire the language spoken to it at its cradle, sexual attraction does not seem to be in any way seriously impeded by racial opinion. It seems that the fundamental gulf that separates men from men has very little if anything to do with physical appearance, or religious controversy for that matter, but economic disparity. The one who is powerless and at the mercy invariably is shunned and despised.

Prejudice is only serious when it closes off the mind, as Gide has noted above, as an initial stand it is inevitable. Thus Gide keeps an open eye and no prejudice is allowed to consistently interfere with interpretation and admiration of what he encounters. When he encounters the huts of the Massa's he becomes lyrical. Admittedly they are strange, but it is their beauty that moves him. A beauty so perfect and accomplished that it seems natural. He approves of its lack of ornament and superfluity. The pure curve of its line, uninterrupted from base to summit, seems to have been arrived at mathematically, by an ineluctable necessity. Those are the works of potters not masons, he concludes, just as he remarks that those particular works of arts, would be impossible outside a narrowly defined geographical area, depending so much on the quality of clay being available. Anyway does not this description belie his assumptions of the Natives being mentally primitive? Or should one take his comment as to the naturalness of its beauty to reveal a lack of conscious design.

Anyway one notices in his writing a progression. The longer the trip takes, and the more direct and prolonged experience with the Natives it involves, the more he appreciate them, the more he extols their virtues and the more he assigns blame on the white colonialists and their blunders. Still, making a point that he does not want to make out the black more intelligent than he is. Thus of all the virtues, intelligence is the last he wants to accord them. Now in our present culture, intelligence is held in high regard at the expense of many other equally commendable, which in previous generations were not neglected. One should keep in mind that at the time of Gide, stupidity was not necessarily thought of as a dehumanizing trait. Finally he makes the point over and over again, that the Natives are excellent fellows, and it is a mistake to think, as many of the colonialists claim, that nothing can be gotten out of them unless by force and constraint, if they would only try a different method. There is no need to make yourself feared, they are capable of

knowing the difference between kindness and weakness.

A journey like this is by necessity also an exploration of a anthropologist. Gide does seem more interested in the natural world than in the human, the former is exotic and at times overwhelming, while the other too often is just wretched. He travels with a certain Marc[8], who is a photographer[9] but above all a filmmaker. Too film the natives is not easy, as the light to do so is not always accommodating at crucial moments. Furthermore, most of the filming is of reenactments which are stiff and awkward, and more often than not, the really interesting and revealing episodes of spontaneous activity, only take place after the camera is turned off. It is hard to find good actors and to make them act. Gide is mostly dismissive of those efforts. There are many displays of so called *tam-tam*, Native dancing, which he mostly find boring, at times repulsed by the frenzy it seems to inspire, in particular among the elderly women. Those serve some religious purposes, and not always happy when attended to by outsiders, once Gide is actually pelted with cakes of clay, and he realizes that his presence is resented. He finds the music intriguing, some of it deeply moving, he tries in vain to put it down in standard musical notation, but finds it very hard to do so. Inadvertedly he is also to become privy to the disposing of the dead. One of his Native staff is taking seriously ill and in spite of a temporary rally eventually succumbs after having brought to a hut, with the vague unseeing eyes of a dying man. A whole is dug, the corpse enwrapped, and branches are put at the bottom, to prevent a direct contact with the earth.

In the northern territories of Cameroon there are a succession of sultans. It is not clear whether those are black or Arab. I would assume the latter. One is described as so fat as Gide hesitates to offer him a seat. Luckily one of the servants in the entourage provides a solid contraption. There are exchanges of polite visits and presents, as to the latter the expedition needs to excuse themselves, as they have nothing to offer worthy of their hosts attention, but they promise to make it up when they return home to Paris[10]. It transpires that those sultans keep their black populations as slaves. They are not interested in technological innovations as to agriculture as there is an abundance of labor. Whatever the natives earn they need to give to the sultan. This may not be so terrible, Gide notes, in view of the fact that the free Natives are paid so miserably and tend to gamble their meagre earnings away. Such temptations cannot enter into the minds of the slaves. In a sense does a slave society differ from one of universal well-fare, in which everyone gives to his ability, and receives according to needs, which is the feudal principles on which many

[8] In fact Marc Allegret (1900-73) who became the lover of Gide when he was just fifteen and Gide in his mid forties. They carried on their affair during the trip in Congo, although there is little if anything to indicate such a state of affair from the book. After the trip Allegret decided that he was an hetereosexual after all, supposedly as a result from his contact with Congolese women, but the two remained friends nevertheless. A filmed version of the trip was screened afterwards. Allegret had a successful career as a filmmaker and is noted for discovering many acting talents.

[9] It seems also that Gide takes pictures, but no pictures are exhibited in the edition I am reading, although I suspect that there must have been plenty, which were later published one way or another.

[10] Sending things to the interior of Africa is not so easy. Most of it is held up at customs or even pilfered by its staff. Gide is several times asked by his hosts to intervene as to the importation of cars and sewing machines which are being held up.

of those sultanates are founded. Gide does not develop those thoughts further. Maybe wisely so, restricting himself to noting that the sultans know, unlike the white colonialists, that it is better to make yourself loved than feared.

As to more penetrating accounts of actual everyday life there are not too many instances in the book. Once exception being in the discussion of the Massas' huts, discussed above. After having extolled their beauty, Gide invites the reader inside. This is a delight he tells you, to come into the cool interior from the scorching heat outside. He praises the smooth walls and describes the tasteful decorations in some detail. Everything is clean, exact and ordered. He refers to the dim twilight of an Etruscan tomb during the hottest time of the day, when the family makes it its retreat. At night, he informs me, the cattle is invited to join them, each of them given an allotted place. When the doors are closed there is no longer any communication with the outside world. One's home is truly one's castle.

Otherwise what do you learn about the man Gide? Traveling with someone is supposed to be trying and you should never attempt it with anyone you do not know intimately and soundly. One should not expect to get an impartial view from a single source, still the kind of reflections and confessions a man may make in his journal may be revealing. We have already touched upon many, apart from his views on the Natives and their plights. His adventureness and physical fortitude, his curiosity and his naturalistic interest. His reading, preferably in foreign languages. Other, unsuspected traits emerge intermittently. At one time he longs for the boat to anchor by a forest and allow him to penetrate and explore its mysterious shades. The conditions to do so are eminently favorable, nothing could be easier than ask the captain to stop, yet he lets the favorable moment slip by. Why? He wonders to himself, maybe the fear to upset plans? Or perhaps more fundamentally, his extreme reluctance to impose himself, to exercise authority to give orders. We also learn towards the very end of the book, that he misses his companion Marc, the filmmaker, and confesses that he cannot enjoy anything by himself. Also, something quite surprising, and maybe not quite true.

So how to summarize such a trip? A journey does no usually have a plot, it is in a sense one damned thing after another, only held together by being linked in time. Thus the enduring memory will be of scattered impressions which have at one time or another touched the traveller. Typical such are his contemplating of crocodiles on the sandbanks, how they get up indolently as the boat passes by, only to slide back again. Occasionally they raise themselves upon all fours and look like antediluvian creatures straight out of a Natural History Museum. Sensations which may imbue the memory of a trip may be the discomfort of heat, to which we have already referred briefly. The worst ordeal is limited to a month or so in the early spring, when the temperature regularly goes up to over 110° F[11] and when a mere 100^oF started to feel cool.

[11] When reading it I was very much surprised that Gide refers to temperatures in Fahrenheit, could it really be the case that France used that scale as late as the 1920's? France, which since its revolution has been committed to the metric system. The explanation is of course obvious, this is an old translation, and Celsius is translated appropriately for the benefit of the Anglian reader. Much is lost by translation, even at the trivial level.