

The Shadow of the Sun

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November 28 - December 2, 2005

Africa is exotic. I remember my first encounter at the age of four or so, in the form of some photographs in a book my mother showed me. Those were pictures of black men outside huts. They stayed with me for life. I have never been to Africa, so the continent still holds a deep fascination to me, in spite of all the misery of which it is the stage. Something similar, in kind but I assume in greater depth, must lie behind the obsession that has propelled the Polish journalist Kapuscinski into the depth of the Black continent, despite deadly diseases and repeated mortal threats.

Africa is not a unified concept, it does contain within itself a staggering diversity. This the author is very careful to point out as he sets out to paint the portrait of the continent through a series of vignettes, most of them isolated, others making up trains of related stories. In this context the author could have mentioned, but chooses not to (or maybe he is not even aware of the fact), that the racial and linguistic variations on the African continent are the greatest in the world. In fact only a small part of the African population left the continent and fanned out in the rest of the world, giving rise to Chinese people, Australian aborigines and pale-skinned northerners (the implication being that each of those diverse groups are genetically closer related to each other, than different African tribes are to each other). This is a useful fact to keep in mind when discussing racial issues. The notion of a Negro race makes simply no sense, we are all members of various Negro tribes. Instead Kapuscinski makes a few conventional concessions to the standard diatribes about colonial abuse. Not that those are wrong, only that they stand out as a contrast against his other fresher formulations.

After having proclaimed the diversity of Africa, only being united as a geographical entity and thus not lending itself to any general remarks, he nevertheless proceeds to make some general remarks setting off Africans from Europeans in particular. First and foremost Africans are not individuals, they only exist as far as they are being a part of a collective. Whenever you get something, you need to share it with everyone else that belongs to you. And where do you belong? To your family and relatives of course, than to your tribe and clan. Relations of kin are extremely important, thus when strangers meet, if there are any possibility of relation, they engage in a lengthy greeting ceremony to find out exactly how. Africa was not partitioned by the Colonialists in Berlin in the 1880's, thousands of different tribes were forcefully unified in artificial entities, which has provided fuel for much of post-colonial strife. The loyalty to your own family, kin and tribe is of course something rather universal, and if we accept this, we also accept a natural xenophobia and hence also an instinct for racism in man. Kapuscinski does, however, not make such trains of thoughts explicit. Another common trait is the belief in spirits, living in an animated world. You do not suffer an accident because of some fortuitous sequence of mechanical events, each admitting a rational explanation. No you suffer an accident because somebody wills your

misfortune. The will can literally render acts of magics¹ And thus incidentally, to the African mind, there is no such thing as abstract evil, at least according to Kapuscinski. A thought may lead to an evil act, but a thought by itself cannot be evil. Also evil acts are punished immediately, and if not they are not evil. Thus, according to the author, the African mind is particular incapable of being attuned to Christianity, in which redemption from sin plays such a pivotal role. One may argue with such categorical statements, yet they do indicate how a primeaval human mind may actually be constituted. The western rational attitude may be more advanced, it has at least created a technological civilization, the fruits of which are eagerly sought by people all over the world², yet when it comes to life and coping with its vicissitudes a more original mindset may correspond closer to what we have actually evolved into. A life closer to your kin, in which each event has meaning, and the world around you is teeming with life and significance, may for most, not to say all of us, be emotionally more satisfying. Superstition is an obstacle to rational thought and progress, it may also be actively destructive, as in mindless persecutions³; yet its abolition leaves many people with a sense of loss of meaning. Environmental concern and subsequent preservation ultimately resides in an almost magical view of the world, a sense of its holiness, once those ties are severed, the world becomes more barren, and thus ultimately open for exploitation⁴. The world for the African resident is particularly harsh and hostile, punishing without mitigation. Riddled with disease, and thus making survival alone a heroic feat. With no navigable rivers⁵, dense forests or barren deserts, intercommunications were reduced to almost nothing. Thus until recent times, African populations remained small and scattered, ekeing out a precarious existence, and thus having only a marginal impact on the environment, allowing the grand mammalian fauna to survive in a profusion unparalleled anywhere else in the world. Ironically, and cynically, Africa became a kind of Eden, in which primordial man and his life and culture was preserved, anthropologically a relic and a fossil and as such a piece of gold to the jaded adventurer. And indeed for the the first wave of colonizers, when the pioneers, through great struggle and personal sacrifice⁶ had cleared the way, the continent must have seen as a great wonderful stage for play, with possibilities of easy riches, a subservient population,

¹ In a chapter on Uganda, the author gets embroiled in a lengthy discussion of the difference between a witch - a natural talent for causing evil, and a sorcerer, who needs to learn the craft. Against the former you may be helpless, against the latter there are countermeasures to be taken.

² although in the case of Africa, those have predominantly been those of weaponry, to which we will return below.

³ The destruction of witches being a prime example

⁴ And indeed much of the environmentalist concern in the western world is a kind of lip-service, where mere sentimentality is mistaken for true appreciation. When appeals to bland concepts such as recreation takes precedence to instincts of survival

⁵ Or at least so we are constanly told, yet on the Congo there seems to have been a flourishing steam-boat trade for many decades at least, and surely the Nile was available to shipping rather deep into the south

⁶ The stories of those mid-nineteenth century, and I am not so much thinking of legendary names like Livingstone and Stanley, but people like the German Barth, make up compelling reading.

and great game to be got⁷ But that virginal, unsullied Africa, of only a few decades ago is gone, and instead what we now behold, at least according to the reportings of the media is an almost unmitigated disaster story. What went wrong?

Colonialism is to blame of course, but also the rapid process of de-colonialization. Within the timespan of just a few years a whole new social class emerged, a process that normally would take decades, maybe even centuries. When the white colonizers left they also left a vacuum to be filled with what in most cases was simply riff-raff. There were elites, educated in the west, and with impeccable accents. But those were in most cases extremely thin. The result has been a corruption on an unprecedented scale. The former colonial powers thought that they could still run the countries, or at least their economies, even when having relinquished formal political power. It turned out to be more complicated than that, and I suspect that the post-colonial influence of the west has been far more insidious than its former direct administration⁸. Kapuscinski also makes the point that the vanguard of the colonializers did not consist of scholars and idealists (like some of the early pioneers) but of soldiers and ruffians, out to exploit and make a profit. Africa is in the possession of incredible riches, be it of timber, game or minerals, yet everything tends to be stripped off the land, to the benefit of the outside world and very little trickling down to the indigenous people themselves.

The west has poured in arms into the continent. Sophisticated arms to fuel intertribal warfare. In fact as weapon technology has made its deadly advance, weapons of combat, rifles and machine-guns, have become so light and easy to operate that children can now use them. And they do. Most of the wars in Africa are now actually fought by children. Children are fearless and easily brutalized, devoid of the instinct for self-preservation and compassion that only maturity can evolve, and hence combat is particularly ruthless and deadly, not fought at a distance, but in horrid intimacy. And when not fighting each other, meaning most of the time, what do armies usually prey upon? Mostly unarmed women and children, because they tend to be closer to various relief funds. Relief is humanitarian, but does that mean it is good? It is necessary, but does that mean it is beneficial? It cannot be avoided, but does that not mean that it does not already exacerbate a situation that is even hopeless to start out with?

All over the world for the last fifty years or so there has been the greatest migration the world has ever seen. We are talking about the migration of people from the country into the city. The process is not completed, in the two most populous countries in the world - China and India, the rural population still dominates over the urban, but for how long? In Africa there has been an exodus from the bush into the city. Not so much to seek new opportunities as to escape. To escape draughts and violence, the countryside being ravaged by the marauding troops of feuding warlords, they have no option. The result is that while until a few years ago cities were orderly, everyone living there having a definite purpose, they are now grotesquely swollen, swamped by refugees, who have nothing to do, only receiving aid (because due to forbidding logistics, relief is usually deposited where it

⁷ I am thinking of the African stories by Karen Blixen, symptomatically set among Northern aristocrats up in the hospitable climate of the high plateaus of Eastern Africa.

⁸ With possibly a few obvious exceptions, not to be seen as examples of post-colonial benignity, but colonial malignity

is easiest to do so). It is not starvation that is the problem, Kapuscinski points out, there is enough food for everyone to go around, that is mostly a question of transportation and logistics. The problem is what to do with those people, what meaning is there to their existence? And it is among those destitute rabble, some of the worst and inept dictators and rulers of the continent have arisen, mediated through a military career. The author is referring to the notorious Idi Amin⁹ or the singularly inept Doe, that let himself be trapped by his rival and erstwhile buddy, being dismembered in front of a video-camera and let to bleed to death and dumped on a refuse heap in Monrovia. Stories like this give fuel to the opinion that Africans are not to be trusted to rule themselves.

Are the Africans capable of ruling themselves? Only to frame the question is to make yourself culpable of a variety of sins against political correctness. Yet, the above description of the African mind, is not really disparaging, it only reflects an original state of mind prevalent among all people, not primitive, but in primitive circumstances. An original state of mind still very conducive to most of us. The Africans are neither worse nor better than ourselves. Apartheid, to take one example, is not an insidious invention perpetrated by the white man against the black. When a trickle of a few thousand liberated slaves were sent back to Liberia to create their own state, they quickly imposed apartheid, according to the author, enslaving the local population, setting themselves apart by the culture acquired while enslaved, in particular through clothing, religion and I assume language. Those former slaves ruled the country unopposed for more than a century, when in 1980 the last ruler was hacked to pieces by the aforementioned Doe, who had his remains thrown to the dogs and vultures. In the past twenty years that country has fallen freely into unprecedented misery and decrepitude¹⁰

The usual African reporter relays the kind of horror-stories you have become attuned to through the media, (although in the midst of misery there may also be islands of simple contentment for all we know) as well as spending an inordinate amount of time describing the problems of logistics and the bureaucratic red-tape that obstruct the smooth search for scoops into a tangle of lies, threats, and delays. Kapuscinski is often relayed, and he reminds us that the African has a different sense of time, describing the African in waiting, cut off from action, motionless, speechless in a kind of catonic state, capable of being upheld for days; but his observations do not usually pertain to the politics of the day, but the timeless and seemingly inconsequential detail. He tells us about the man-eating lion, such a scourge on the Indian workers building a railway across East-Africa. The lion is ordinarily no threat to man, most of the time it is satiated and full, content sleeping under a tree. In fact you could easily walk by and, unless provoking the beast, be fully out of harms way. And when a lion is hungry it does not go for a human, it desires tastier food, an antelope

⁹ Until recently alive, I recall, either kept in Lybia or Saudi-Arabia

¹⁰ The author digresses how easy it is for a foreign correspondent in Europe, say walking the streets of Florence, to write stories. The stories in fact write themselves, every step of the way is steeped in history, loaded with associations. But what to do if you are an African correspondent, walking the streets of Monrovia? There is no history, no architecture, no art, no associations. Just an unending succession of unvaried bleakness and debilitating poverty making the environment completely barren of artefacts. And being in the city, there is no richness of nature to distract and fascinate. One feels almost sorry for Kapuscinski being stuck in such dire backwaters.

or a gazelle, prey that takes an effort to hunt and seize, but well worth it. When the lion gets older or seriously wounded, it is no longer able to pursue its preferred prey, but is reduced to go for human flesh. Even an old and decrepit lion is a formidable opponent even to the strongest and healthiest of man, who unarmed stands no chance. So the poor Indian workes were picked off one by one, their flimsy tents providing no protection. And why are there no dead elephants, the white man asked. For many years it was a secret, and maybe still is, the author is told by a native. The elephant has no natural enemies, and thus it will die of old age. In fact as it gets older and less and less agile, it needs to walk deeper into the lake to drink water, eventually it will need to go so far out that it cannot come back. The bottoms of the lakes in Africa are filled with the bodies of dead elephants.

Things change in other ways. Small revolutions that the outside observer may not be able to really appreciate but rather resent. The plastic bucket is one such. It is cheap and it is light. It means that children can carry it, and they are thus able to take over the chore of getting fresh water. In former times water was carried by heavy and expensive clay jars. It meant that women were stuck waiting for water, as they could not risk leaving their valuable jars. Nowadays children can leave the buckets, providing long colorful arrays by the water-pumps. And the time for women are released for other things.

To live like an African. Most Europeans do not, in fact they do not even try. Many travellers have been to Africa, but what have they really seen? Kapuscinski refers to a young Scottish couple he encountered on the train from Dakar to Bamako. They are sufficient unto themselves. They are satisfied with the physical act of travel, to move from one set of co-ordinates to another. Of course they have been to Africa, just like a specific point is being enclosed by the contours of the continent. But they have no desire to get to know the space through which they are moving. They spend no time in cities, no sightseeing, the logistics of transition is enough. When they disembark a train, they make no effort to speak to anybody. Maybe they once did it, and the consequences were bad. In Africa everybody expects something from the white man, and this is but natural. The white man has power and is rich, it is only natural to try to make some deal with him. Human relations, when stripped down to the essentials, are about striking deals. I give you something, I expect something back from you. This is done not through some superstructure, as we are used to in the West, but on an individual to individual basis. If you do not know how to act, how to respond, and if you as a consequence fail to deliver what is expected, it naturally leads to frustration and disappointment. But probably they are not unique, on the contrary, many young westerners may be travelling like that. Roaming around the globe, devoid of adventure and curiosity. It is the thing to do, not the realization of a childhood dream instructed by subsequent learning. But even if you have the desire to penetrate, it is not easy, it is simply not expected of you. Most Westerners only stay at fancy hotels, live in plush neighbourhoods, and some parts of Africa are simply paradisaical. Coastal cities freshened by breeze, shores washed by a gentle surf, lush vegetation, the smell of spice and tropical fruits. Kapuscinski once tried to live in African quarters. Everybody was dissuading him, but he was obstinate. In the end he found a solution. Repeated burglaries were frustrating, but he was told, that the fact that he was burgled meant that he was accepted. In the end some of his contacts

made him buy some long white quills from a hen. Those were attached to his door. From then on his apartment was left alone.

In the tropic there is no dusk nor dawn. Night follows upon day abruptly. In the day it is incredibly hot, and the heat seems to be what brings to the author the greatest physical discomfort. And the sun is always there, and protection is only to be found in the shade. A man losing his shadow is lost. In the night there is still heat, a heat that still may be oppressive, but there is no light, and everything comes to a standstill. People are afraid of the dark, they prefer to be inside protected. To be surprised on the road when night descends like a blind, is a calamity any African wants to avoid at all costs. There is no much light at night on the continent, something that is forcefully displayed by satellite pictures. The west glows in the night, in Africa the outline of the continent is barely delineated, the interior is completely dark. This by itself would be a compelling reason to go there.

There is no conclusion. The author has presented vignettes, made a few remarks, some obvious, others more incisive, yet he makes no attempt at suggesting solutions. This is wise, after all he is but an observer. He is there to take note, to reflect, but renounce any responsibility. The world is as it is, we can only marvel.

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