

Dark Star Safari

Paul Theroux

July 16 - July 20, 2004

One of the epiphanies of my trip was the realization that where the mode of life had changed significantly in Africa I had known, it had changed for the worse. This can be chosen as the summary of the authors re-encounter with Africa. An Africa he had known thirty five years earlier in his youth as a member of the peace corps. His was a descent into, what the media had described as a Hell of unmitigated misery, whose denizens were presented to smugly shocked visitors on television screens as 'the lucky ones'.

Theorux has in a sequence of previous books documented his travels, preferably by train, to different corners of the earth. Nowadays when true exploration has ceased to be an option, the classical intrepid explorer has been replaced by the likewise intrepid tourist. The author is constantly warned about dangers ahead and bad people, but nevertheless in spite of forebodings of doom, he manages to stay out of harms way, the closest to disaster being shot at in the Kenyan desert. Whether this is by pure luck, fortitude or just plain street-wisdom, remains to be seen. His documentation, at times interrupted by digressions¹, is basically one of the inevitable trivia of travel, getting from A to B; and thus inviting an artless identification with the reader, which provides the charm of the narrative, a charm which in the end simply fades away and leaving a void.

So what is wrong with Africa? Theroux knows with the certainty of the opinionated that it is simply foreign aid. Foreign aid which makes the indigenous population passive and waiting for the dole. Everywhere he notices lazy indolent black males doing absolutely nothing. (While at least the women are doing the necessary chores for survival). Foreign aid is self-perpetrating, conducted by haughty people, who incidentally always snub him sitting ensconced in their new shining white Land-Rovers. The money that is invested is always skimmed off by a corrupt elite, who have been to the best of western schools and always send their children abroad. There is no hope, no prospects but a bleak future. The only hope Theroux sees is a return to the soil a return to traditional ways of subsistence farming. And it is exactly that return to the bush that has allowed the populations to survive if not thrive, during harsh times.

Theroux notes with horror the unchecked swelling of the big cities, into overgrown villages. Shanty towns with no planning nor any plumbing, infested with crime and beggars. There is a sad lithany of countries that have failed - Kenya, Tanzania, Malawia, Mocambique. Uganda hold out some hope, although it is now a sad reflection of what it once was. But Zimbabwe and South-Africa are still functioning states, providing a glaring contrast to the misery around. They are wealthy, with good roads and functioning infrastructures. Yet within themselves show shanti towns and misery rivalling those of Dark Africa outside.

¹ sometime revealing startling innocence of knowledge, like remarking that the word for pineapple in Amharic - an Ethiopian language, is *ananas* just like in Italian, seemingly unaware that this is the case with almost any language save English

The white farmers of Zimbabwe are the heroes, Mugabe a certified madman hell-bent on the destruction of his country. South Africa, just like Israel, is a First World country, containing within itself the Third World.

Theroux has all the time in the world to travel. He does not plan ahead but rely on improvisation. He hates to fly, because flying disrupts continuity. One wants to link one country to its neighbour, to feel the intimation of the one ahead in the one at present. Just like he in Egypt is able to sense the presence of the dark continent below. The title of this book stems from his constant feel of being on a different planet, a dark image of the Earth itself.

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