

Negerland

A.Lundkvist

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Such a title for a book would be impossible nowadays in Sweden. The word 'neger' is an impossible poisonous word whose use is enough to put a book on the codex, if not disposing it to the flames outright. The word 'Negro' in the States has still some respectable uses, there are some Black organizations which make use of it in their names, but the Swedish 'neger' is a definite no-no. There are other disapproved denotations, with which the book is sprinkled, such as 'svarting' which could be translated into the derogatory 'blackie' in American English, while 'infding' means 'Native' and is as such perfectly OK, while in Swedish it has a slightly derogatory spin to the word 'Aborigine', meaning literally 'born in' but always referred to inhabitants of primitive societies.

But soberly analyzed, Lundkvists book is not really racist. It is a book of its time, the late 40's just after the Second World War. Anti-colonialism was in the air, pioneered by India, but getting a foothold in Africa, championed by an elite educated at the most prestigious universities in Europe. Of this not very much is apparent in 1948 but the author picks up some signals.

It is a travel report through Africa, starting at Algiers, then visiting a number of oases, which appears deep into the desert but a map reveals that they are situated fairly far north in Algeria (still of course solidly French). Of the oasis Bou Saada the author reports that it is strict Islamic and patriarchal and that no women or girls are seen in the streets. The men often get to be hundred years old, while the women tend to die at forty. This, or at least the former, is hard to believe. The author travels south through the endless Sahara, having a penchant for nature description, with which he generously paints most of the pages devoted to the crossing. He notes that contrary to common belief only a mere ten percent of the area is covered by sand dunes, most of the rest simply consists of rocks. Furthermore small towns in the heart of the desert are visited giving an almost medieval impression. Negroes become more and more prevalent the further south he gets, and are clearly second-class citizens next to the dominant Arabs, a state of affairs considered fairly normal at the time. In he also meets the Tuareg people, traditional nomads of the region with a stratified society, and incidentally not Arabs although, if initially reluctant adherents to Islam. Eventually he arrives in Nigeria, the most populous of the African regions, and under British colonial administration. Here he talks about the shortage of women due to the tradition of polygamy among men. The real losers in such a system are not the women per se, but the men, the majority of which are doomed to be without women, as there are usually as many females as males in a population, and any discrepancy can only be arrived at through systematic killing of men and boys, but this does not seem to enter the mind of the author. From Niger he flies to the Congo river, and then makes his way down to South Africa. This is just before the imposition of the Apartheid system, which was about to be implemented and split the White minority. He then follows Eastern Africa and eventually flies home.

Africa in the late 40's was still very traditional with non-urban Natives living in huts and with a wild-life still vibrant outside populous centers, although showing signs of decline. One of his titillating observation is on the sexual energy of the Black population which obviously fascinates him. A travel book may when it is written mostly be thought of providing exotic entertainment at a time when indeed exotic travel was the privilege of the very few and accessible to most people only through articles and books or through touring lecturers showing slides and if lucky snatches of movies. Nowadays who would attend a slide show of a trip to Africa, when such images are freely available on TV and those really intrigued can afford to travel themselves? But with time a travel report assumes new, and maybe unintended, features, namely not just as a report on geographical displacement but also temporal. The book becomes an interesting documentation on social mores at the time, seventy years ago. On one hand there is the inevitable patronizing attitudes towards those living in misery, on the other hand there is a fascination and respect for those who want to better themselves filled with pride. Thus the author sees the possibility of the continent rising out of their primitive state and enter the modern age. In retrospect this transition can be seen for what it turned out to be, admittedly with some shining exceptions, a traumatic affair with wars, famines and deep corruption by local elites, secretly deplored by many, but seldom explicitly voiced for reasons of political correctness. The primary victims of African mismanagement are African people themselves,

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