

Venture to the Interior

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Laurens van der Post grew up in South Africa. On his mother's side Africa goes back a long way, many generations of White settlers, while his father, on the other hand was born in Holland, The author came late onto the scene, being the thirteenth and youngest of a brood, his father died when he was eight, of his paternal grandparents he has no memories, as they were gone long before he was even born, while his mother lived into an active and advanced age well into his middle-age. This family history is important to him, and it does contain drama. His maternal grandmother, along with her little sister miraculously survived a massacre on a group of settlers, including her parents. He also refers casually to his maternal grandfather seeing to it that the last Bushmen were cleared out of the region. The author being something of a Jungian, Africa is to him part of mankind's collective unconsciousness to which he has somewhat privileged access through his mother. As an adult he left South Africa and spent time in England, particularly London, which he came to think of as his home. The war saw him both in what was then called Abyssinia as well as neighboring Sudan and then eventually the Far East, in particular Indonesia where he was interned as a Japanese prisoner of war. After the War he was a bit lost, the experience, in spite of its horrors, must have been congenial to him, as to many other people, in the sense of providing adventure. As he notes in the context of the First World War, war does not prepare people for peace. One gathers that he is sent by the Government on a so called fact-finding mission to the British province of Nyasaland, slung along the eastern coast of the lake by the same name, bordering Portuguese East Africa. One surmises that the terms of the mission are vaguely phrased and that he was entrusted with it through what is nowadays called networking. Throughout his travels he repeatedly has thrown in his way old comrades of sorts. The world was small at the time, at least the world that counted.

Before the Second World War colonial empires were firmly established and seemed as if they would last indefinitely. After the war they were about to crumble. India was given independence in 1947, and the African possessions were to be divested in the 60's, but still in the late 40's this was still in the future. In India there had been an independence movement for many decades led by well-educated and sophisticated Natives, it was different in Africa, the educational elite was very thin and there was little organized opposition to colonial rule. Thus when he author sets out for Nyasaland the colonial structures are very much set in place. It has been argued on one hand that the colonial powers exploited the natural resources of their possessions, that they were in the eyes of Lenin, the logical continuation of ravaging capitalism; on the other hand that the colonies were actually economical strains on the mother countries, that having them was a matter more of prestige than economic satisfaction, and hence that the dissolution of colonial empires were forced by economic necessities. They were a luxury that could not be maintained, especially as priorities were being changed. Portugal obstinately held on to its outdated colonial empire

into the 70's, but seemed not have profited much from it, even before colonial wars made maintenance far too costly.

Van der Post does not like to travel by air. It is too modern, too fast, and destroys the natural sense of time and space, the connection of which constitutes the essence of travel. He flies with a South African company, and his fellow passengers are mostly white men, colonial administrators or businessmen, and the odd plumber who decides to go to South Africa to check out the lay of the land as far as opportunities for plumbers are concerned. And of course it turns out that the pilot of the plane is an old acquaintance of the author going back before the war. High up in the air, the passengers are treated to all kinds of luxuries as to food, this being the age before mass transportation, when flying was something exclusive. But flying is not comfortable, there is a storm and there is turbulence, the machines at the time not being powerful enough to cruise at a high altitude. Van der Post is very uncomfortable, not to say frightened, and he notices how his fellow passengers resort to strange antics to deal with their discomfort and suppressed fear, how they drink a lot and turn very personal in their conversations, something that does not exactly alleviate the author's malaise. There is a short stop in Khartoum, and in Nairobi, a city that grates on him, there is even an overnight stay. Thus only after many hops, including Salisbury, he finally finds himself in Blantyre, the largest city of the possession, although demoted from its rightful position as the capital.

So finally he is in Africa, the trip there being unreal, a passage through clouds from which the contours of the land below have been blurred into featurelessness (in vain he has tried to follow the route on a map, looking for familiar landmarks), with the exception of a dip over the Serengetti, when the pilot taking advantage of the good weather flew low over the heads of the animals, providing distraction to the passengers. Africa is strange, an almost oppressive physical presence indifferent to man. Man does not belong there, not even the Natives really, many of whom are fairly recent residents coming from other parts of the continent, not everyone can like the Bushman, claim a long tenure. The animals do though, they are part of it and its mystique. Here and there he sees feeble attempts of the colonials to recreate England in the bush. If superficially successful, they are slowly strangled by Africa crowding in. This leads to the natural question as to the fate of the white man on the continent (excepting its northern shores, that are part not of Africa but the Mediterranean). Is he doomed, is his presence only temporary? The question is not posed in the book, only obliquely implied. For a few decades in the 20th century Africa was a sanctuary to the irresponsible and adventurous spirit. The continent teemed with game, was sparsely populated by a docile and helpful population. How small and petty would not life at cramped quarters at home compare to the freedom and space that Africa could supply, as well as the magic and the mystery? This was before rebellions, wars of opposition, to be followed by civil wars, overcrowdedness, forced agriculture, ecological strains, depletion of game, dysfunctional states, making the continent the poorest of them all, a locus of discontent and violence. The time before must have been seen as a Garden of Eden, at least to the exclusive elite who could truly take advantage of it.

Is the author a racist? The notion is very popularized not to say vulgarized, but I would say that racial aversion is not at the heart of human divisiveness. Natural instincts such as affection and sexual attraction do not recognize any racial barriers, after all humans

are genetically remarkably similar, an instance of materialistic biology actually confirming political idealism. Racism is a structurally social phenomenon, and as such it is more or less identical with class division. Thus one may argue that racism only makes sense at a social level not at an individual. Individuals have their likes and dislikes, often very irrationally based, and those are up to their discretion. The problem really only arises when there are social ramifications going beyond the purely private sphere. The fact that there are individuals whose power extends beyond their immediate circle has confused the issue, their individual prejudices obviously have direct influences on what regulates social life, in particular laws. Racism has become a religious issue, man is exhorted to look deep into his soul in order to detect any signs of impure thoughts to be exorcised. It is up to him to fulfill the duty to love his neighbor. But you cannot love on command, such love born out of duty is at best a social convention.

Van der Post regrets the apartheid politics recently imposed on his Native land. He finds them stupid and misconceived, as did many, not necessarily a majority, of his white compatriots, yet of course he finds himself unquestioning at a position of privilege, which he takes for granted by convention and habit, just as rich people normally take their position for granted as something the world owes them. Other people may be poor and dependent on them, not because of any intrinsic inferiority, but that is the way the world happens to be made. The stratification of humans is in most cases arbitrary and accidental, hence unfair and unjustified. But what about a stratification that is rationally based? Which can be argued to be fair and deserved? It is known as meritocracy, the ideal to which we are exhorted to move out of away from primitive racism. A person should not be judged by the color of his skin, but by the tenor of his character. But is not so called justified inequality even more existentially cruel, especially if it is not based on special retroactive pleading? Of course this is not an excuse for discrimination, only setting it into perspective.

What is he supposed to do exactly? Survey some little known areas and report on them to the Government? This means going on exciting hikes traversing ground that few (white) people have encountered. In short to be something of an explorer set to discover. In practice it involves setting up an expedition, engaging bearers. Anonymous Blacks doing the hard job. The only people that are named and described at some length are the colonial administrators. This is natural, it is to those people you need to turn to get things done. Those in their turn are supported by a retinue of devoted servants and local chiefs, who can supply needed manpower. People are poor, thus food and modest wages provide strong incentives. This is how the economy works, you have to accept it.

The first expedition goes to the plateau of Mlanje, not too far from Blantyre. This is highlands with many peaks close to 8000 feet. It is forested although the forest is under threat from excessive logging and fires. In fact the flora of the region is unique, in particular it houses a special kind of cedar, which according to the experts is not a cedar at all, a tree that cannot be found anywhere else in the world¹. Its raisin has a particular smell, and its wood is resistant to termites and other insects, and thus very much in demand. The British authorities have established a forest department, headed by a certain Quillan, eager to take off with the author escaping from his duties at his desk, and one among its employees is

¹ Checking on it on Wikipedia, it is listed as a kind of cedar, but its precarious position and its uniqueness to the mountains, are confirmed.

a young British guy by name of Vance, who is living up in the forest, and, as the author is warned, possessed with a rather keen interest in trees. They meet the young Vance with his young wife and small child in their house and are invited to stay with them, in spite of their initial reservation. The author sensing the setup wisely declines the offer and instead sets up his camp close by. The introduction of Vance and his wife Val, gives to the otherwise factual story a human drama worthy of a D.H.Lawrence, a writer under whose influence van der Post obviously must have found himself. It transpires that they have left England, where Vance felt himself hemmed in and unappreciated, finding a paradise in their new settlement, where they are alone and utterly devoted and dependent upon each other, a close bond which makes every outsider an intruder. Vance has a mission, and in a new situation, on a strange continent freed from previous social structures, he can clearly create a new identity for himself, in order to overcome his sense of inferiority. The forest becomes his mission, and his only wish is that it will be left alone, that the cedar forests will spread and cover it completely. As noted fire is a problem, logging however restricted by the lack of roads, each trunk has to be carried on the heads of bearers painful down narrow winding paths, is not yet the major threat. A road will be in the making, that is inevitable, and Vance himself has been forced to build a bridge out of his beloved cedars, intentionally making the planks scarce, as to save on them, although, as Quillan notes, it will make for a bumpy ride. The trivial remarks cuts the highstrung Vance to his quick.

Vance, once his initial reserve is gone, is eager to join their small expedition. The author has forebodings, heightened by the awkward and self-conscious farewell Vance takes of his young wife, obviously uncomfortable at being on display. Such a rupture of a private bond.

What attracts the pen of van der Post is not so much his companions, to say nothing of the bearers. Of animals there is not much to report either, except for the possibility of a prowling leopard, and a fight between an eagle and a buzzard, described at great length. What impresses the author is the physical mass of Africa, the vegetation, the weather, the sky and the changes of days into night. It is into this rhythm camp life has to comply. The weather is unpredictable, and due to the relative heights of the mountains above the plain, humid air from the Indian Ocean transversing the Portugese lands, are caught by the peaks and turned into storms. Africa is hot and tropical with an unrelenting sun, but here on the mountains, it gets cold during night and dawn, and it is the cold that is the main threat, not malaria or sleeping sickness, the former of which the author has had his fair share, periodically ravaged by attacks, which he, however, due to his physical fitness can ignore.

The author is not happy during the hike, there is some discord and he has his forebodings. Vance gratuitously unsprings a trap a native forester has set. A prank of course, but not in keeping with the dignity of the exploration. At another time he and his companions take a short cut through inclement weather, the author is opposed to it, favoring a longer safer route but is outvoted, They almost come to grief in the dense mist and cold and experience premature relief as they finally make contact with their camp. The bad weather persists and they decide to cut things short. They descend along slipper slopes and come to a river that has to be forded. Ropes are twined together and Vance, thinking of himself as an experienced mountaineer volunteer to walk first. A rope is attached to him and he

is given the admonishment always to face the ongoing current. He does not do so however and even tries to swim the last few yards, and as a consequence, relinquishing his hold on the bottom is swept away by the strong current. They hold on to the rope for all they can, hoping to wind him back to the shore, but the rope is cut by sharp rocks, and once it snaps they know that he is dead. They make some perfunctory attempts to retrieve his body, but it is hopeless, it is lost, and rather than to descend further they turn back and make a long haul without sleep and extended rest back to the forest house, breaking the news to the distraught wife. It is the author who does it, Quillan not feeling up to par. An extensive report on all the details, sparing none, is provided by the author, and the poor wife asks over and over again through the night what really happened. Van der Post feels a deep guilt, not so much for letting Vance take the lead over the river, after all that was his own decision; as for being here in the first place. Had he not intruded himself, Vance would still be alive with his wife, leading their charmed existence. The author is exhausted, but none the worse for wear, no doubt being of an iron constitution. The poor wife is brought back to civilization on a stretcher.

After this drama, which inspires the author on various reflections on the relationship between the spirit and the external world, the rest of the book is somewhat of an anti-climax. This time he travels to the northern part of Nyasaland in order to explore the plateau of Nyika, another sparsely inhabited highland sanctuary with freezing temperatures. He is first set to fly there, but the weather is too bad so he charts a car and goes north. His reception, in spite of misgivings and warnings, is as warm as always. Administrators are accommodating and teams of bearers (i.e. porters, the author is not a so called Native speaker) are arranged. Some piquant episodes are recalled, such as well-shapen young woman lying completely naked and insensate on the road, not dead as it turns out, just dead drunk, and when revived very inviting and alluring. There are a few scattered references to naked female flesh in the book, no doubt watering the mouth of the author, but in writing he can control any untoward urges. They climb the mountains, up and down. They encounter a village, where the drum is taken up, and an orgy of dancing expressing vibrant sexual energy is enacted, waxing and waning. The author himself goes away, although fascinated by the spectacle, the rhythmic beat of the drum being endemic to the continent and such a powerful expression of its human soul, yet he prefers to study the starry sky above him, each star with a vividness that is denied it in less deserted regions of the earth, and with the Milky Sky cast over the sky, not just as a faint suggestion, but as a brilliant splash of milk.

Only the first few days of the expedition is recorded in the book, then there will follow weeks of extended residence, to which the author is content to refer in a brief passage.

Anyway the message of the book is clear. Africa is a spiritual quest to made sense of by proto-jungian concepts. No explicit reference is made to the Swiss sage, but the mysticism that permeates the work is, at least in retrospect, an obvious reflection of it.