

"L'Afrique Fantôme is at heart a book about the impossibility of human contact". Discuss.

When Michel Leiris set off for North Africa in 1931, he did so a disillusioned man with personal problems. Leiris was embittered by Paris and its metropolitan strains; he was looking for a psychological rebirth. The understanding of Leiris' contemporary background upon writing "L'Afrique Fantôme" takes its importance from the subjectivity of ethnographic writing. Essentially, Leiris writes in the style of a diary which underlines his personal obsessions and fears. However, the intention of this essay is to consider how much "L'Afrique Fantôme" is in fact a book about the impenetrability of cultural and ethnical barriers.

Firstly, in order to examine the subject more thoroughly, it is important to consider what is precisely meant by "human contact". This can be defined in either a physical or a metaphysical way. In this particular book, although Leiris does regularly describe the human form in a sexual and occasionally perverse nature, it is evident that, as with most pieces of ethnographic writing, the concept of "human contact" is strongly weighted towards cultural understanding and social acceptance. In this way, it can be argued that the trip from Dakar to Djibouti undertaken in this novel was basically flawed from its outset. The very nature of this journey, undertaken with the grace and financial guidance of the French aristocracy and closely linked to the colonial administration in Africa, could not possibly allow anything more than physical proximity to any visited tribe. Leiris was genuinely beholden "to his nation and class, and the preservation of their interests"¹. All was undertaken within a colonial framework.

This sense of being indebted to the French upper classes was intensified by the fact Leiris came from such an area of society. It seems for the most part of this book that the group as a whole surveyed their surroundings with a sense of "conquistador" binarism. The idea is that Leiris' writing took its significance from his experience of the primitive Other, in relation to the civilised state in which he saw himself. This concept

¹ <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/document153.html>

surely indicates, through the language Leiris uses, the inability of the colonials to cross ethnic barriers.

The European attitude can be further highlighted by looking at particular events in more detail. In the entry for the 6th of September, 1931, the difference in stature of Western and non-Western civilisations becomes apparent with the “acquisition” of the *Kono* mask. The chief of the *Kono* made it clear to Griaule and Leiris that the mask could only be seen following the sacrifice of two chickens from each member who wished to view it. After a small amount of discussion between the group, Leiris writes « Griaule...fait dire au chef de village par Mamadou Vad que, puis qu’on se moque de décidément de nous, il faut, en représailles, nous livrer le Kono en échange de 10 francs, sous peine que la police soi-disant cachée dans le camion prenne le chef et les notables du village pour les conduire à San ou ils s’expliqueront devant l’administration. Affreux chantage ! »².

This passage underlines and defines the power relations between the groups as well as the priorities of the colonial quest. Also, Leiris’ final expression, “Affreux chantage!”³, demonstrates his relish towards the actual situation itself. A further *Kono* is stolen the following day, and Leiris further distances himself from the conquered African tribes by this time taking charge of the heist, although he states “depuis le scandale d’hier, je perçois avec plus d’acuité l’énormité de ce que nous commettons”⁴. It is clear that Leiris is aware of the profanation he had previously undertaken, although he obviously is willing to sin again, characterising the intentions of this journey as a whole.

Leiris set off in search of aided reflection on his own cultural values and illumination for his readers. His goal was to find a reconnection with himself in his most natural state, via his experience with the primitive African tribes he would meet. However, a further impediment which would not allow this to successfully occur was the trip’s

² “L’Afrique Fantome”, pp 103-104

³ “L’Afrique Fantome”, p 104

⁴ “L’Afrique Fantome”, p 105

itinerary. It is clear throughout the book that Leiris rarely writes more than a few hundred words on each event. As the group's archivist, he was responsible for the ethnographic retention of all information and events. What is evident though is that the group spent very little time in each place, which led to their encounters with the natives being brief. This process brought about a feeling of dejection in Leiris, who had excitedly written towards the beginning of "L'Afrique Fantôme", "Voici enfin que j'aime l'Afrique. Les enfants donnent une impression de gaieté et de vie que je n'ai rencontrée nulle part ailleurs"⁵.

Even though this primitive impression lasted in Leiris for a while, in fact for the majority of his trip, he finally came to recognise "the impossibility of becoming the child or the native of which he dreamt"⁶. He wrote:

*« Avec mon casque, ma chemise kaki, ma culotte de trappeur, je reste le même homme d'angoisse que certains considèrent comme un bon type, à la fois tranquille et pittoresque (?), une sorte de bourgeois artiste »*⁷

However, an instance where Leiris felt himself to have slightly broken down the barriers of these numerous social differences gives a good example of what is possible in these situations. It also shows, nevertheless, that there is a state of pertaining to one culture that makes complete transferral to another one somewhat unattainable. In the midst of what he described as an « étonnante pantomime de divination »⁸, Leiris felt the desire to join in a tribal dance. His excuse for not actually participating is noted as fatigue, but the fact remains that Leiris scarcely managed to get past the aesthetic in his writings. The difficulty of communication and therefore impossibility of real contact with native African tribes can be seen in the extremely common usage of translators.

The conclusive truth behind ethnography is that it is in its very nature self-involved to an almost, and occasionally complete, auto-biographical state. Reflexivity is essential to ethnography and the lack of communication explained in the previous

⁵ "L'Afrique Fantôme", p 34

⁶ <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/document153.html>

⁷ "L'Afrique Fantôme", p 162

⁸ "L'Afrique Fantôme", p 44

paragraph brings about the filtering of what was really happening down to what becomes subjectively recorded and objectively viewed as being “true”. This selection and ordering of information by an ethnographer, such as Leiris in « L’Afrique Fantôme », exemplifies the fundamental flaw of ethnography. The question is, why did Leiris undergo such a disenchanting mission in the first place? The answer becomes clear throughout the text. It could be concluded from this book that true human contact is obtainable amongst certain ethnic groups. One could say that the more “civilised” a society becomes, the less opportunity one has to be a human at a core, base level. Taboo is a huge part of contemporary society as it was in France in the inter-war period. The mystery of Africa must have been alluring for Leiris, and in other aspects worthwhile. France was undergoing a great cultural modification taken from its colonies and works such as “L’Afrique Fantôme” reorganised its national identity within the context of the nation’s imperial legacy. However, as previously stated, if ethnography allowed distant cultures of the French colonies to become more understandable for the bourgeoisie back in France itself, the very nature of its practice “still preserved the centrality of a French perspective”⁹.

A final example of Leiris’ position in his journey through Africa becomes unmistakable upon reading about the following incident and his prediction. Leiris discusses the arrival of some artefacts that he and Griaule had bought. They are in an administration office with some interpreters and Leiris foresees, « Il ne nous est pas encore arrivé d’acheter à un homme ou une femme tous ses vêtements et de le laisser nu sur la route, mais cela viendra certainement ». This shows his feeling of awe in his own natal ability to completely manipulate human beings in the way he describes the scene with such clarity. In fact, other examples of Leiris’ lucid description of certain other inhumane acts brought about by the French group show his relish for being the thief and the villain.

A conclusion as to whether this book is “at heart about the impossibility of human contact” draws one closely to the use of the term “heart”. By its nature “heart” implies feeling and a sense of the subconscious; an idea of something that is not completely

⁹ <http://etudesafricaines.revues.org/document153.html>

rationalised. This works for “L’Afrique Fantôme” as, although Leiris may be aware about the shortcomings of his writing and consciously makes an effort to achieve a degree of pragmatism and objectivity, the core of this book does not deal with, but, more often than not, involuntarily exemplifies the “impossibility of human contact” through explanations of the practicalities of the journey and the nature of events that arise. At times it has the feel of an autobiography; at others a nature programme.

Word Count: 1504

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