The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief

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Like all of V. S. Naipaul's "travel" books, *The Masque of Africa* encompasses a much larger narrative and purpose: to judge the effects of belief (in indigenous animisms, the foreign religions of Christianity and Islam, the cults of leaders and mythical history) upon the progress of civilization.

From V. S. Naipaul: "For my travel books I travel on a theme. And the theme of *The Masque of Africa* is African belief. I begin in Uganda, at the center of the continent, do Ghana and Nigeria, the Ivory Coast and Gabon, and end at the bottom of the continent, in South Africa. My theme is belief, not political or economical life; and yet at the bottom of the continent the political realities are so overwhelming that they have to be taken into account.
"Perhaps an unspoken aspect of my inquiry was the possibility of the subversion of old Africa by the ways of the outside world. The theme held until I got to the South, when the clash of the two ways of thinking and believing became far too one-sided. The skyscrapers of Johannesburg didn't rest on sand. The older world of magic felt fragile, but at the same time had an enduring quality. You felt that it would survive any calamity.
"I had expected that over the great size of Africa the practices of magic would significantly vary. But they didn't. The diviners everywhere wanted to 'throw the bones' to read the future, and the idea of 'energy' remained a constant, to be tapped into by the ritual sacrifice of body parts. In South Africa body parts, mainly of animals, but also of men and women, made a mixture of 'battle medicine.' To witness this, to be given some idea of its power, was to be taken far back to the beginning of things.

"To reach that beginning was the purpose of my book."

The Masque of Africa is a masterly achievement by one of the world's keenest observers and one of its greatest writers.

The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief Details

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From Reader Review The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief for online ebook

Ruqaiya Said says

I had to re-read certain parts in this book to come to a complete understanding of what was being discussed. Despite being an avid reader , I generally do not read works of non-fiction. This book came as a recommendation from a colleague who swore (literally!) that it was an absolute page-turner. At first I was taken aback by the very theme this book revolves around, one that I usually refrain from discussing with people. To me, religious and or cultural beliefs are too personal of a matter to allow anyone to poke their nose into let alone dissect and analyse it the way Naipaul does in "The Masque of Africa".
Naipaul manipulates his own curiosity into making this subject intriguing. There were moments when I'd be utterly disgusted by a certain practice or belief but I would have to suppress my disgust.
To a certain extent there have been African influences in my life , but these would never be talked about within the confines of our household simply because I grew up outside Africa, hence my parents didn't deem it necessary for me to be well versed in such matters. To them and most other people including minorities who have lived in Africa for generations ,these beliefs were futile , petty and baseless. That being said is testimony of what impact the advent and spread of Islam and Christianity have had on the natives , which is also one of the things this book talks about a great deal.
Reading this book was eye-opening, informative and thought -provoking to say the very least.

Marco Tamborrino says

Attento e interessante resoconto su alcune credenze africane. Emerge il tipico pessimismo di Naipaul riguardo la condizione attuale e il futuro dell'Africa.

Rachel says

I refuse to put this on my religion/philosophy shelf. This book, which is supposed to be about "African belief" is about an author who is less interested in exploring Africa than he is in his own comfort. He travels in class, sometimes with high-powered friends and even bodyguards at times, arranging to meet chiefs, who don't really tell him anything. He often goes to meetings and leaves before anything really important is discussed. He mentions over and over that you need to grease palms in Africa, but never seems to bring money or liquor to meetings. (Cheapskate - he lets his guides pay instead.) I kept wondering why Naipaul wrote this book and what he was trying to say. I find his writing unnecessarily complex and difficult to follow. Sentences went on forever with more commas and semicolons than someone like Dan Brown would use in a whole book. A few other things bothered me. 1) Naipaul focuses on the well-being and abuse of animals, but seems not to see the desperation and pain of people that we KNOW is happening alongside in these countries. 2) He is incredibly judgemental, "It was impossible for any rational person to feel that any virtue could come from the remains of these poor animals" (ritual sacrifices). I can find irrationallity in ANY religion. That doesn't make them less valid to the people who believe. 3) He constantly brings up Trinidad, in the way of an "Ugly American".

I have to confess, as I started the book my sister told my some unappealing anectdotes about Naipaul which could have colored my reading of the book, but I really don't think so. He writes almost with the attitude that

"I'm an F-in' Nobel Prize winner, I don't have to do the little things."

Robert says

The Masque of Africa by V. S. Naipaul is a travel book focused on a contemplation of African religions and beliefs. It begins in Uganda and continues on through Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Gabon, and South Africa.

As with all Naipaul's books, this one achieves its authority with an understated but stately consistency and knack for the telling detail. He is a master stylist in that he maintains the same tone and pace regardless of what he's writing about, and he is uncompromising in his reporting.

There's very little about Islam in this book, which is good, because Naipaul is relentlessly negative about Islam; the one vivid story he tells here about a South African woman of mixed race seeking an identity by marrying a Muslim cleric illustrates this perfectly: the woman fails to achieve a thing.

The spice of the book is its colorful rendition of animistic, spiritual beliefs, which vary from place to place but follow the same pattern of initiation, belief in "the ancestors," bloody sacrifices of innocent animals, and lots and lots of superstition and fear of magic and demons, some of which can hide right under your foot.

Naipaul begins in Uganda because he had a fellowship there forty years ago and wants to start this trek in a place where he might feel somewhat at home. Not the case. The population in Uganda has exploded, AIDS and Idi Amin notwithstanding, and crowded into cities like Kampala,once beautiful, no longer so.

At each stop Naipaul has a guide or what anthropologists (and spies) call an informant. Not infrequently these informants are misinformed, and the results are distressingly comical. What he sees are often enactments, not the real thing; shows, not true frenzy.

The best part of the book deals with Gabon. Here the world is really the forest, which is dark and deep, full of mystery, endless, and yet endlessly carved up by Chinese and Japanese industry. Naipaul nonetheless creates a sense of totally integrated life where one form of energy is transmuted into another, and the blackness of night is as complete as the din of the animal and bird cries.

At certain points Naipaul finds interlocutors who are political. Jerry Rawlings is one, Winnie Mandela is another. Winnie Mandela, who appears near the end of the book, is vivid and real and, as Naipaul presents her, a great antidote to the westernized image of her as someone who simply rode on Nelson Mandela's coattails. She's bitter and eloquent and realistic and disarming. A great portrait.

Another figure who appears is one of our own "ancestors" Albert Schweitzer. I hadn't known he was more missionary than medical figure, nor had I ever had the sense that he was less than a great, self-sacrificing humanitarian. Naipaul raises questions about this, good ones.

The problem of South Africa in many ways is a good way to end this book. The figures portrayed here are the ones least integrated in the old traditions, and the prospects for a multi-cultural society are dubious. Having not ended apartheid by means of a civil war, the two major groups, whites and blacks, don't know what they're all about. Meanwhile South Africa winds down like a watch that needs some attention, but no one is giving it that attention.

For sheer ebullience, there is always Nigeria, the other great giant of Africa. Here, as in other countries, Naipaul sometimes has to back away from his quest--he's facing too much, knows that there is a point when,

as he puts it, an observer becomes an intruder,wears out his welcome.

For those who know something about Naipaul’s personal character and behavior, it will come as no shock that I found his recurrent expressions of sympathy for cats and dogs (both animal types are appallingly regarded and treated in Africa) rather disarming. He genuinely seems moved by small, fury creatures living on the knife edge of sacrifice.

Overall, I’d say this book wouldn’t impress an anthropologist. There is no theory of religion and society here. It’s an eloquent travelogue that seems honest in its reporting, acute in its judgments, and not prone to distortion. For those of us who have spent some time traveling in difficult countries, The Masque of Africa will save us some discomfort. The one spot I’d definitely like to visit--and never considered before--is Gabon.

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brian says

in the few years i worked at an outdoor magazine stand i was frequently struck by the seeming arbitrariness of british celebrities and socialites who'd grace the covers of UK tabloids -- they just didn't look or feel anything at all like 'real' movie stars. of course, for some poor sap in botswana, bahrain or burundi, i'd imagine toby maguire, steve carrel, jenna fischer, or sandra bullock don't seem possessed of tremendous amounts of star quality. similarly, naipaul's book of belief in 6 different african countries (uganda, ghana, nigeria, ivory coast, gabon, s. africa) has the effect of making us realize how arbitrary (and preposterous) our own religious beliefs & myths are. indeed.

Dave says

This book is short, but dense and challenges readers from at least three backgrounds, including:

1. The Generic 'Religion as Binding Ritual' type

I always want to tear my hair out (but can't because I have none) when I hear people talk about traditional tribal religion as giving shape to communities, providing a pattern of life, and so on, and so lament its passing. Yes, it does do these things - but that is hardly what tribal religion (or any religion) is about. Make no mistake, many Africans really believe in forest spirits, curses, etc. They will kill cats (and on rare occasions people) suspected of bringing a curse, sell animals for sacrifice, have the 'Juju Man' come and beat 'offending' women, and so on. How's that for a 'pattern of life?'

Both Christianity and Islam have made huge inroads in Africa over the past century, but Naipaul shows how much 'traditional' religion still survives in Africa, and is even mixed here and there with some Christian ideas.

2. The More Conservative Christian Type

Many Christians (like myself) are unaware of what it means to change one's religion in the midst of very deep rooted traditions. I wonder if we have taken into account the social and psychological dislocation that will result from this religious change. Naipaul subtly shows how Africa's sense of itself has been uprooted in part by imperialism, religious change, and so on. This sense of dislocation impacts all areas of life and may contribute in part to much of the continent's political instability, among other things. And perhaps this is why

traditional paganism has a lingering hold. Despite its black magic and confusing ritual it does provide something comfortable and familiar. It is a pattern of life, for all that.

Having said this, one can see the stifling impact 'traditional' religion has. The medicine man has to be bribed, appeased, etc. There are veils of secrecy and fear. What we would consider normal social interaction can't exist in such an environment. Again, back to my first point, you can't have meaningful ritual or binding ties without those rituals rooted in some kind of belief. So -- choose those beliefs carefully. I think one of the African Church's challenges over the next few decades will be to somehow create a Christian culture that is fully 'African.' As the western Church has failed at this task for the past 350 years or so, I have no advice to give them, and wish them more success than us.

3. The African Philanthropist
Maybe westerners are just too impatient with Africa, and because we usually think of religion as a condiment, many well meaning and good humanitarians (better people than myself) have no idea what Africa's real challenges are. After Rome's fall, it took Europe about 500 years to reach a 'pattern of life' that could bind people together socially and create viable political realms. None of this happened until the continent was essentially Christian, at least in name. And when it had not fully happened, it took 'Strong Men' like Charlemagne to hold things together. Are we wrong to think Africa can do this in the 50 odd years or so since most of them gained independence? It may be that we hold them to much higher standards than we hold ourselves to in our own history.

Naipaul manages to detach himself from his writing and report in deadpan style. He forces the reader into an uncomfortable position. Many times I just wasn't sure what to make of what he saw, although I don't Naipaul always knew either. I felt uncomfortable, but not in a bad way.

Overall, this book made me have a greater appreciation for 1) African Christians, who even in 'Christian' places face unusual challenges, and 2) The idea that religion does more to shape a place than any other factor. In the end, individuals and communities are what they worship, whether consciously realized or not.

Bill says

in this book naipaul goes back to africa after being there in 1966.he is now in his late 70's and the book is less of a travel memoir than a commentary on the state of religious belief systems in africa today.while christianity and islam are fighting it out for overall supremacy, witchdoctors are still common and ritual sacrifice (human and otherwise) is still carried out.when you read, for example, about the pygmies reverence for the forest and the gods therein, it makes you wonder whether maybe they make more sense than the 2 main organized religions.unfortunately, the book is rather tedious and slow moving at times, marring what would otherwise be an excellent book.

Rick Skwiot says

I was a sympathetic reader going in. I have read and admired V.S. Naipaul’s fiction and nonfiction for decades. I anticipated his newest tome, The Masque of Africa: Glimpses of African Belief, enough to pre-order it. But I came away disappointed not only in the book but in the Nobel Prize-winning author as well.

It was bad enough that Naipaul skims the surface here in his investigation of traditional African religion. He

seemingly conducted no scholarly research (there is none cited or footnoted) and interviewed no experts, relying instead on anecdotal evidence taken from literary and political operatives and a few reputed and urbanized holy men, tribal chiefs and witchdoctors. But even then he might have pulled off this disorganized and eclectic travelogue if he had taken the time to actually write some decent prose. But it reads like a first draft, and as Hemingway said, “All first drafts are shit.”

Here, for example, is a portion of the Nobel Laureate’s account of his visit to the home of former Ghana President Rawlings:

“The house was well run. No word had been said but, to bridge the gap left by Rawlings and his wife, a well dressed waiter appeared with coffee and fruit juice. I went to the lavatory. I saw the family dogs in two big paved cages at the back of the yard. One cage had small dogs. The other cage had big dogs, a Dalmatian and various hounds, all fine and well exercised and happy. While I watched I saw them fed by a servant who entered the cages with their food. I could have looked at the feeding scene for a long time.”

This was the sort paragraph I would love to come across when reading freshman compositions. I would have its author copy it on the chalkboard and then proceed to instruct the class in basic prose craft: When and how to combine sentences. How to vary sentence structure. Where to add sensory details that make a scene come alive. How to use action verbs instead of flaccid state-of-being verbs like “was” and “had.” And then perhaps to talk about larger issues, such as developing a taste for what a reader might find interesting. Thus I would also instruct the Nobel Laureate.

I could cite scores of similar examples in the book, but I have more consideration for my readers than does Naipaul, apparently. Now pushing 80, he drags us from one superficial encounter to another, humorless, tired and at times admittedly frivolous. Driven not by desire to grasp and understand African belief but, seemingly, to fulfill a book contract obligation.

His powers of observation dimmed, he seems rather bored by his subject and the people he meets. Perhaps in part because he meets with the wrong people. Much of his reporting is hearsay rather than direct observation. A lot of talk without much point, and even Naipaul himself often questions the credibility of his sources. But the book is well subtitled, as all we get here are mere glimpses of traditional African religion, and no cohesive and revealing portrait.

However, we do stumble across some fascinating tidbits about Islam in Africa: its practice of polygamy and opposition to the nuclear family, seen as selfish and ruinous to societies; the harsh realities of harem life; the use of Egyptian eunuchs as harem guards. Alas, these are contemporary, not historic accounts, albeit second-hand, as Naipaul was denied access to the harems. Nonetheless, one wishes he had devised a way to interview a eunuch or a concubine. He also reports the horrid yet compelling recent history of Uganda, as well as other African locales.

I suspect that Naipaul’s agent and publisher encouraged him to write and publish this book, figuring to earn some fast cash off the venerated author. Had they, instead, been looking out for his legacy and reputation, they would have encouraged him to rework or, better yet, recycle his manuscript.

Orlando Tosetto says

As crenças que interessam a Naipaul são as da África negra (islamismo ele conhece bem). O pouco que ele aprende e fala delas, porém, lhe serve para perceber que não há solução ou esperança à vista para um

continente dominado pelo caos, pela rapina, pela violência e pela superpopulação. Dá tristeza de ler, mas é muito bom.

Srivas says

This book attracted a fair bit of negative press upon publication for its prejudiced views of Africans - Robert Harris called it "toxic" for example. There IS some old-fashioned prejudice here - the critics weren't hallucinating - as for example when Naipaul speculates that a Ghanian he interviews might have acquired his analytical bent of mind from a Danish ancestor. It's an odd passage (the more so since just prior to this demeaning assessment the analytical man has been recounting a pretty crazy story involving the president of Ivory Coast gaining his powers in a ritual where he's temporarily chopped up and reassembled into a snake which lies with his sister - not unusually analytical in any country). Mostly though 'The Masque of Africa' stays well on the right side of the line dividing negative but constructive writing from racist screed. Naipaul doesn't like much of what he sees and hears in Africa, and is happy to say so. If you're a well-meaning Western liberal critic reading, you tend already to react with dismay - one is not supposed to "go there."

But V.S. Naipaul has always gone there and then some. He isn't an "Afro-optimist" but then he's never been an -anything- optimist. Basically, this book is another iteration of Naipaul-disses-the-third-world, in the spirit of 'An Area of Darkness' or 'Among the Believers.' Like those works, it isn't an attempt to be comprehensive or "balanced." Naipaul repeatedly mentions the rubbish in the streets but, well, why on earth not? It's exactly what he did in his India books, where he compulsively kept noticing people defecating in public, ignoring the protocol on the subject prevailing among polite Indians. Just as there he observes Gandhi's singular interest in sanitation, he notes in Uganda that the present dirt and filth would be shocking to precolonial Bagandans. Basically, Naipaul writes about what amuses, horrifies, irritates or surprises him, and if a nice college professor somewhere is scandalized, so much the better.

You'll find here the same brilliant, scathingly critical, cantankerous, amusing but gloomy text Naipaul is known for. A representative quote: "*The loggers opened up the forest; the poachers moved in. Some of the logging companies were themselves Chinese, able now, far from home, fully to express the Chinese hatred for the earth.*" There's not as much sharp insight as in his best work - Naipaul is aging, and getting lazy, and parts of the book feel pretty "phoned in." This is only a decent book, in other words, but decent for Naipaul still translates to worth reading. If you believe it's important to grapple with appraisals of Third World cultures that aren't positive, you'll find this a useful read. Toxic? I don't see it.

Justin Evans says

This book, and its reviews on goodreads, taught me a couple of things. Most importantly, I realized how important a book's title can be. I picked this up at the Museum of African Art in D.C., where it was on super-sale. There were a number of fetish objects in the museum, which were much more powerful than most of the modern art around them. The curator's notes suggested that much of this was a response to the slave-trade (especially from Benin), which would have been so catastrophic for the people there. That piqued my interest--in the U.S., you hear a lot about the effect of slavery on slaves (justifiaby), but not much about the effect on the places from which those slaves were, for want of a better word, kidnapped. So I was to learn more about traditional African religion. Unfortunately, the books at the Museum's store were all about how great it was/is to be African. They mostly featured very colorful dresses.

So Naipaul was the closest I got to what I was looking for. And here is the importance of titles: this is not a book about African religion. Many reviewers seem almost aggressively angry about that fact, pointing out that Naipaul did no scholarly research, just relates anecdotes, talks about his own feelings etc etc... Well, all that's true. But this book is obviously travel literature. You don't browse J-Stor when you're on holiday.

The second thing I learned follows directly from this: I have no criteria with which to judge travel literature. What am I looking for here? There's little intellectual content, but V.S. does a reasonably good job highlighting the emotional and political importance of traditional religion, as well as how the 'major world religions' get swallowed up by it. The style is readable but hardly admirable. It's repetitious. There's an awful lot in here about how bad Naipaul feels when animals die, but not much about how he feels when people are forced into poverty and suffering. He seems like a bit of a prick, although sometimes conscious of that prickiness.

I learned very little about African religion. But I did learn that I need to read more, better travel literature. My wife recommends Fermor. I'm open to other suggestions. And I also learned that I should read more Naipaul, because if this--a pleasant way to kill an afternoon--is as bad as he gets (which I suspect it might be), the good might be very, very good.

Petra CigareX says

Naipaul's early books, those set in Trinidad, The Mystic Masseur, A House for Mr Biswas and Miguel Street are gentle books. Stories set in the relative poverty of the rural Hindu community of pre-war Trinidad. All his other books, whether his travel books, his railings against religion or fiction are bitter.

This book, is a return to that first gentleness and generosity of judgement, of observation. Or perhaps it's a late maturity, the author having worked out all his issues and able to apply his vast knowledge of religion and people to this revisiting of these countries he first visited in the 60s.

He revisits not only the countries but explores the changes in their religions, whether indigenous deist or animist or mainstream (Islam, Christianity but with distinctly local flavour). How much of these beliefs inform and modify imported civilization and politics, and how much have they survived, if they have in this modern world of shiny buildings and the drive for money above all?

Fred R says

This is likely to be Naipaul's last original publication, and he is indeed a little slow, a little tired, and more than ever obsessed with his comfort and his finances. The book is also poorly edited. His perspective and style, however, remain, and I find them as attractive and original as ever.

Naipaul has always had a distaste for borrowed, imported, or imposed beliefs (Islam in India, Black Power in the British Empire, Christianity in Africa), so it's understandable that he would have some interest in traditional African religion. It looks like he set out (hard as this is to imagine) thinking a viable future for Africa will only be possible through an ideological/political return to these animist traditions. In his earlier books about Africa, the bush was menacing, symbolic of the rage and chaos that he saw overwhelming the European colonial structures. In this latest book, written from a more comfortable, less anxious perspective,

the bush often shows up as an ideal, pristine and full of meaning when compared to the dirty, over-populated, and omnipresent urban sprawl.

This new synthesis doesn't survive his journey. What first sets him off course is a Brahminical horror at the mistreatment of animals so common in traditional African religious practice (to some extent reminiscent of that shockingly reactionary documentary, Africa Addio), a horror which overwhelms any optimism he had developed about animistic revitalization. In South Africa, after a few last bloodthirsty interviews (including one with Winnie Mandela), he writes, in his veiled way, and with a great deal of sympathy for the formerly colonized peoples of South Africa (guided, in his views of Apartheid, by Ghandi's story, although with more interest in the African population than Ghandi ever displayed), that the only future for the white population is total prostration and, eventually, disintegration. As to what will take the place of the current traditional/modern, African/European compromises that characterize the continent, he has, by the end of the book, no idea.

William2 says

This one doesn't quite hold together. The title word "glimpses" suggests the narrative's overall sense of fragmentation. The book begins with the author's second visit to Uganda in the 1990s; he was originally there in 1966 as a visiting scholar at Makerere University where he met the young Paul Theroux (See Sir Vidia's Shadow). He returns now to conduct his enquiry into traditional African belief. He finds it diminished by monotheism, not surprisingly, but still existing, if mostly in the irrational mindset of the people. (See Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart for a chilling dramatization of such thinking.)

He tells the fascinating story of the Ugandan Kabaka, or king, and how the structure of belief surrounding this king supported Ugandan culture and society. The British kept the Kabaka in place during their colonization, but after Independence, Prime Minister Obote sent Idi Amin to attack the Kabaka's palace, and he was forced into exile and ignominious death and the traditional underpinnings of Ugandan culture gave way to calamity.

It's when Naipaul goes to Ivory Coast that the book goes badly off course. It's because Naipaul is recycling material from an earlier essay, "The Crocodiles of Yamoussoukro." (See The Writer and the World: Essays.) Suddenly we're being told the story of the Ivory Coast's lifetime president, now dead, and his use of traditional belief, probably including human sacrifices, to stay in power. Naipaul tries to stick to his general theme of religious belief, but the background overwhelms, becomes padding, and the basic thesis gets buried in too many details of setting and the old president's reign. (Well, what can one say? Naipaul has written so well for so long, I suppose it was inevitable that the time would come for him to rest on his laurels.)

Chapter Five, on Gabonese religious practices, does much to right the ship. Gabon is so intensely forested and uncultivable that one interviewee says "This place was not meant for man. It is for the animals." For the Gabonese, the forest is pure spirit. The pigmies are the masters of the forest's botanical remedies and spiritual life. It is their magic that's needed when you have a illness the physician can't treat, when you are initiated into manhood, when you have to have a deleterious spell removed. I found this by far the spookiest part of the book. As one interviewee says of the value of pigmy knowledge: "When it comes to fighting the spirits you have to know the rules, or you can die, because the spirits are very strong." (See Ben Okri's The Famished Road for a dazzling tale of the African forest's spiritual power.)

So, recommended to Naipaul aficionados, but not to the first-time reader of Naipaul. There are too many other wonderful options. For instance, the two fabulous books on Islam: Among the Believers and Beyond Belief and all three of his books on India. As for the fiction my recommendations would include A House for

Mr. Biswas, Guerillas, A Bend in the River, A Way in the World.

Jonathan says

The slide continues. Naipaul's latest sees the grizzled Nobel Laureate on a jaunt through several sub-Saharan African countries to have a look at (or get "glimpses" into, as he more accurately puts it) traditional African spiritual beliefs, and how these have fared in the aftermath of colonialism and the coming of Christianity and Islam. A wonderfully Naipaulian theme; but he seems alarmingly lacking in the passion to truly explore it. He appears more concerned than ever for his personal well-being (understandable, given his age); and he shows an overwhelming concern for the welfare of animals--he is ready to judge an entire country by its treatment of cats. His feeling for history is still there, as is his interest in individuals and their stories. But the ironic and absurd humour that defines the best of his travel writing is all but gone.
