# THE UNCERTAINTY
## *of*
# AFRICAN REFLECTIONS

## *V. S. NAIPAUL: THE MASQUE OF AFRICA*
## LONDON: PICADOR, 2010

### BY JONA FRAS

In his brilliant essay on racist imagery in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness, Chinua Achebe scolds an imagined American youth "unaware that the life of his own tribesmen... is full of odd customs and superstitions and [who], like everybody else in his culture, imagines that he needs a trip to Africa to encounter those things" (Achebe 2010: 2). In a way, this appears to be the motivation of V. S. Naipaul for writing The Masque of Africa, an account of his recent journeys to six African countries: Uganda, Nigeria, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Gabon and South Africa. In the light of Achebe's eloquent criticism of such projects, it is tempting to follow Edward Said (1986: 53) and simply dismiss Naipaul as an insensitive ethnocentrist. But the underlying issues are rather more complicated, and – ultimately – rather more disturbing. His stance towards Africa emerges as more confusing and contradictory – indeed, uncertain. This uncertainty is present on two levels, one explicit, the other more subtle, which I discuss in turn below.

V. S. Naipaul is a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature – a contemporary literary authority if there ever was one – and his writing skills are certainly not to be questioned. In The Masque of Africa, he provides colorful and often very interesting descriptions of various African rituals and belief systems: burial practices in Uganda, initiation rituals in Gabon, soothsaying in Nigeria. The style is often almost ethnographic in its sensitivity to detail. It is interspersed with Naipaul's own reflections, experiences, and discussions with educated locals on the problems faced by Africans, including economic development and political issues such as the South African apartheid and the rules of dictators such as Idi Amin in Uganda and Houphouët-Boigny in the Ivory Coast.

But Naipaul's primary focus appears to be religious belief. He seeks what he sees as 'traditional African religion': tombs of old kings, shrines, soothsayers and witchdoctors, and ritual practices. He is often puzzled or disappointed when these beliefs and rituals appear much more trivial than he expected, or too 'mixed' with monotheistic religious beliefs and practices. But, eventually, he appears to endorse syncretism when it pleases him: a French expatriate's staging of an initiation ritual in Libreville pleases him much more than the 'authentic' version observed in a village in Gabon's interior: "it used the same local materials, but it added style and finish" (2010: 236).

In a way, this quote is indicative of Naipaul's general position towards Africa and Africans, as it emerges from his writing. He is often impressed by the creativity and depth of African beliefs and rituals – and yet, he eventually always turns out to be disappointed. He is disgusted by the trivia of African life: the mountains of trash, the constant attempts at swindling foreigners, and the fact that he has to pay money for every visit he makes to a local shrine (or palace, or ritual). It is not just African religion, or even culture, but Africa in general that lacks "style and finish". British botanical gardens are "a gift for later generations"; by contrast, the land outside them is "choked with vegetation", and the landscape a "disappointment" (2010: 168). But a sacred grove can also be described as "beautiful" (2010: 137). Therein lies the first level of uncertainty: his image of Africa is an endless vacillation between admiration and disgust, between a respect for local beliefs and modes of life and a continuous arrogant denial of their ultimate worth or validity.

One of Naipaul's foremost concerns is animal welfare – especially the deplorable way most Africans treat cats. A symbolic reading of this latter emphasis would only serve to reinforce an impression of ethnocentrism, but this is probably not Naipaul's primary concern here. His repugnance at African attitudes to animals should, rather, be read literally. And in a literal reading, this trifling disgust at the welfare of felines – at one point, he even judges the worth of an entire country by the cruel method they allegedly use to kill cats – emerges as rather comical, rather ironic. Especially so in the face of the overwhelming, tragic realities of the continent.

This leads to the second axis of uncertainty on which Naipaul's book oscillates. If his opinions vacillate between disgust and admiration, their articulation vacillates between irony and seriousness. Is his disgust meant completely literally? In other words, is he aware of the irony that his writing produces? Given his utter lack of reflexivity regarding his opinions, there is no possible way we could tell.

At the very least, Naipaul is sincere in expressing his opinions. And disgust at the practices of the people one studies or writes about is certainly not an emotion alien to allegedly more sensitive authors, such as anthropologists. Saba Mahmood writes of the "repugnance" that she often felt at the practices of the pious women she researched in Egypt (2005: 37). Anthropologists usually try to resolve this with a twofold movement: one, trying to suspend judgment in order to understand the practices of the other; and two, articulating the tension they may feel between their liberal values and scholarly motives, by working through these issues reflexively in their own writing. But Naipaul does neither. Is his ultimate impression of Africa positive or negative? Does disgust defeat admiration? Or does he remain as confused as we all do with social and cultural experiences that go beyond the comfort zones of our everyday lives?

I do not agree with Said's assessment that Naipaul is essentially a third-world writer in denial of his origins (1986: 53). Despite his impeccable post-colonial credentials (Naipaul was born into the South Asian community in Trinidad), his ultimate identity emerges as firmly first-world, English, indeed rather parochial. And this is, finally, where a critical reading of The Masque of Africa becomes profoundly discomforting. Naipaul's Africa emerges as a foil for his Western experience: it seems rather comforting that there is an abode of civilization where cats are treated fairly, where guides and taxi drivers do not attempt to cheat you at every turn, where activating one's links in the local political hierarchy is not necessary for a hotel to provide you with a habitable room. If he is aware of this issue – and he may well be – it certainly does not show through in his writing. But would a more reflexive engagement be sufficient? Is it even possible to write about Africa from a 'first-worlder's' perspective without echoes of arrogance, of ethnocentrism, of patronizing?

A third level of uncertainty reveals itself: our own uncertainty whether we are even able to minimize, or at least to problematize, the relationships of power underlying any engagement of a non-African writer with Africa. Naipaul is definitely quite far from making any such attempt. But his writing – so easy to criticize, and yet so difficult to fully renounce – brings the issues involved into sharp relief. Ideally, it should serve as an inspiration to write a counter-account: aimed at a similar, non-academic audience, but shot through with an anthropological sensibility, a cultural relativism constantly anxious about its own inadequacy (Viveiros de Castro 2009). Such accounts may, perhaps, succeed in raising sensitivity and respect for cultural and social forms different from one's own. But the effort remains precarious, forever marred by the inherent uncertainty of our African reflections. ◈

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

**1** Achebe, C. (2010 [1977]). An image of Africa. London: Penguin
.

**2** Mahmood, S. (2005). Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

**3** Naipaul, V. S. (2010). The masque of Africa. London: Picador.

**4** Said, E. (1986). 'Intellectuals in the post-colonial world.' Salmagundi 70-71: 44-64.

**5** Viveiros de Castro, E. (2009). 'The Nazis and the Amazonians, but then again, Zeno.' Unpublished manuscript.