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Without Schedule nor Urgency

Response to First Half of *An African in Greenland*

The idea of the seasonal day-night cycle has been a recurring theme of one of the major differences between the Arctic and life in the temperate zone. Lopez explores the concept quite physically, explaining what would happen to the position of the sun as dimensions of time-of-year and latitude vary. He also explains how the flora and fauna have been naturally selected to survive this seasonal change. But through Kpomassie's account we see human (psychological) responses to this change, especially in contrast to warmer climates.

As Kpomassie is on his final leg to Greenland aboard the *Martin S*, he already loses track of the day-night cycle, and finds himself without schedule and "never [knowing] quite when to go to bed" (Kpomassie 75). He wonders about how the inhabitants sleep – he finds that, during the summer months, sleep is light and often interrupted.

The lack of daily rhythmicity may be shocking to one who is familiar with the circadian rhythm. This involves a regular 24-hour sleep-awake cycle that maintains hormonal levels (and thus regular bodily functions) and lack of it may cause weight gain and impulsivity, according to a study by Rockefeller University (Society for Neuroscience). Recent research suggests that the Circadian rhythm is still present in Arctic species, so it is not restricted to the temperate zones (Walter et al.). We observe the manifestation of a severe psychological effect: the "near insomnia" (Kpomassie 139) during the summer months and the "polar hysteria of the Arctic autumn" (Kpomassie 138) that occurs as the days elongate. The seasonality of this pathology is suggestive of the Circadian rhythm, although this is speculative on my part.

An important predicate to the disease other than the seasonal changes, and a recurring theme throughout the narrative, is that of urgency and idleness. Kpomassie mentions that the ones most likely to be affected are the ones who also suffer “darkness and inactivity ... Generals, being always busy, were not affected” (Kpomassie 139). Luckily, our narrator is very active and ceaselessly amazed (albeit not always positively) throughout his adventures, so he is not at high risk of inactivity and thus this hysteria. But Kpomassie is able to observe this in Erik, one of the (apparently average) residents.

If we consider the activity levels of the residents of Greenland, they largely seem to live slow lives. This is evidenced by his various accounts of the Greenlanders: the jaillees at the Godthab (who are quite impassive at their jailing); the fishermen at Frederikshab (who care more about seal and birds and conversing during storms than fishing – “I could appreciate the Greenlanders’ helping one another outside their villages but lamented their ability to get on with the job” (129)); the incessant partying, sexual encounters, and visiting habits of those at Cape Farewell; and the general drinking habits (which is not a feature isolated to Greenland but is definitely characteristic). In the penultimate case, there are only two true hunters and Kpomassie seems puzzled at whether the rest of the village actually has jobs or are purely living off a Danish allowance from the government. From his experience with strict rules in Togo restricting many of his actions, and his recent encounter of bustling European cities, where the busy-ness of a life governed by schedules and deadlines is familiar to us readers, this life seems quite relaxed and carefree.

The polar north necessitates a disorientation from the day-night cycle (lack of schedule) but the connection with a disorientation from active life (lack of urgency) is fuzzier.

One plausible explanation for the apparent laid-back-ness is that it is simply as protection against the harshness of the environment. It seems any sort of travel, even at the southern tip of Greenland (as noted by the shipwrecks around Cape Farewell), is perilous, never mind during the winter months. In order to preserve their life and lifespan, and since commercial fishing and allowances are enough to live off, there is no need for urgency.

Another (less plausible) explanation is that the Greenlanders (subconsciously) still do abide by the schedule dictated by the sun, and experience our daily deadlines as yearly experiences. This means that their life may be one of as many “days” as years. This can be metaphorically extended in many ways – perhaps this means that their lives’ ups and downs are much more majestic and exaggerated than those in the temperate zones where state of mind is reset every 24-hours. Perhaps our daily disasters are their yearly ones, and our yearly crises their lifelong ones. Perhaps the identity crisis felt by elderly Eskimo people who are miserable enough to commit suicide when they are unfit to hunt anymore is akin to the modern mid-life crisis, but that mid-life crisis that will be endured for a decade in a fast-paced life may be the twilight remainder of an Arctic dweller’s life.

We haven’t yet (in terms of book progress) encountered the Eskimo people that Kpomassie idealizes, so this analysis may be only relevant for the laid-back people of southern Greenland.

Bibliography

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