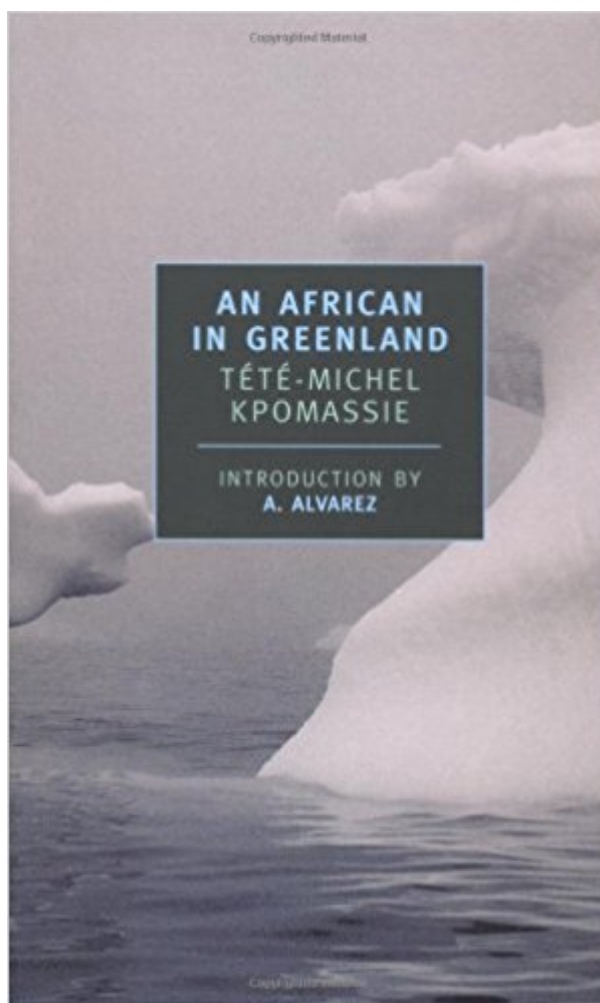


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An African In Greenland (New York Review Books Classics)



TÃ©tÃ©-Michel Kpomassie was a teenager in Togo when he discovered a book about Greenlandâand knew that he must go there. Working his way north over nearly a decade, Kpomassie finally arrived in the country of his dreams. This brilliantly observed and superbly entertaining record of his adventures among the Inuit is a testament both to the wonderful strangeness of the human species and to the surprising sympathies that bind us all.

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TETE-MICHEL KPOMASSIE was born in Togo in 1941 and now lives in France. He left elementary school after six years and received the rest of his education in the course of his extensive travels in Europe and Africa. In 1981 he was awarded the Prix Littéraire Francophone for *An African in Greenland*.

Many obvious ironies occur as Tete-Michel Kpomassie, a young man from Togo in West Africa, makes a journey of discovery to Greenland. For the first sixty pages, the author describes life in Togo in lively detail and his decision to go to Greenland, a country as far, culturally, from Togo as it is possible to get. Over the course of ten years, he travels through Ghana, the Ivory Coast, Senegal,

and Mauritania, before arriving in Marseille, Paris, Bonn, and eventually Copenhagen. During this time, he reads constantly, learning about life in other parts of the world, becoming fluent in German and French, and sensitively observing the differences between his culture and those of the other countries in Africa and Europe. By the time he gets a visa for Greenland, he is twenty-six, a highly skilled anthropologist, having learned what he needs to know through his own unconventional daily life. In June, sometime in the mid-1960s, he leaves at last for Greenland, ill-equipped but full of enthusiasm, trusting in his ability to make his way in that country and to become part of the Eskimo culture there. Leaving in a cargo boat with eight other passengers, he enjoys the long days of the midnight sun, which are then lead to ice floes and icebergs as he approaches Cape Farewell, the southernmost tip of Greenland. His arrival in Kangerlussuaq is as exciting for the inhabitants as it is for Kpomassie: So intense was the silence, you could have heard a gnat in flight. The local inhabitants are universally hospitable, providing a place for him to stay and sharing meals and drink. Their children are allowed to do what they want, with little discipline. Though people work for most of the day when there is sunlight, they get tanked up early at night and celebrate all occasions, with a whole month dedicated to celebrating Christmas. The Inuit willingly provide him with the fur clothing he needs in the winter, and the women in the families with whom he stays make him the specially sized boots and garments that he needs. With a wonderful eye for the telling detail, Kpomassie observes the differences between the world in which he grew up, the world in which he has lived in Europe, and the world of Greenland. He becomes real, a stand-in for the reader who lives through his journey vicariously. The people he meets not only represent their culture but emerge as individuals through their interactions with him. Despite language differences, he is able to communicate and share their lives, and because of his honesty and his curiosity about their culture, he makes many friends. His eventual departure from Greenland is bittersweet, inspired by his duty to help the youth of Africa to open their minds to the outside world. His return to Europe and his later life as a citizen of the world, are testimony to his sense of adventure and his commitment to looking beyond the local to the universal.

Michel Kpomassie writes an interesting biography about growing up in a family that worships pythons in Anecho, Togo and then getting the dream of exploring the Arctic in the mid-twentieth century. While he never reaches the North Pole, his friendships with the Inuit peoples of Greenland draw out similarities and differences with his African heritage. He is conscious that he represents a formerly colonized people visiting another and does a good job of refuting stereotypes. Through his

experience, this self-educated man earned a French university degree in anthropology and became a noted lecturer. His biography has been reprinted to celebrate a half century since his arrival in Greenland.

AN AFRICAN IN GREENLAND is the most remarkable travel journal I have read in a very long time. As a boy in Togo, Kpomassie was injured and while recovering read a book on Greenland that seized his imagination. The book recounts the events that led to this early obsession with Greenland, his efforts to reach the country and his travels in Greenland once he arrived. Kpomassie is a charming and honest narrator. He is at once perceptive, wry and compassionate in his account. He describes his travels and interactions with various cultures with almost anthropological detail and yet he never forgets the people he meets are human, wonderfully flawed perhaps, but human nonetheless. He turns his critical eye on his Togolese upbringing, his time in France, Germany and Denmark and ultimately Greenland. He never neglects to mention his own foibles, in his interactions in the lives of those he meets. (How could he not since he was the first African most of the Greenlanders had seen.) The story is also tinged with sadness for the loss the customs and rituals Kpomassie had hoped to witness in Greenland, the combined poverty and generosity of the people and the inevitable sorrow of ending a journey. It is a fascinating study of Greenland but also a study of a man pursuing a dearly held dream and that is what makes it such a satisfying read.

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