



**AN AFRICAN  
IN GREENLAND**  
TÉTÉ-MICHEL  
KPOMASSIE

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**A. ALVAREZ**

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## AN AFRICAN IN GREENLAND

TÉTÉ-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*.

A. ALVAREZ is a poet, novelist, and author of nonfiction books on topics ranging from suicide, divorce, and dreams to poker, North Sea oil, and mountaineering. He recently published his autobiography, *Where Did It All Go Right?*

# AN AFRICAN IN GREENLAND

TÉTÉ-MICHEL KPOMASSIE

Translated from the French by

**JAMES KIRKUP**

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## INTRODUCTION

*AN AFRICAN IN GREENLAND* was first published in Paris, in 1981, when Lévi-Strauss was still a powerful influence in French intellectual life and there was great interest in so-called exotic societies. By those standards, Tété-Michel Kpomassie's book is the ultimate exotic mix—an adventure story that begins in Togo, a narrow strip of a country, formerly a French colony, sandwiched between Benin and Ghana, and ends in Upernavik, way north of the Arctic Circle, on the west coast of Greenland. In the course of this strange journey Kpomassie, who later went on to study anthropology, comments shrewdly on local customs (to him, those of the French are as outlandish as the Togolese and Inuit) and has interesting things to say about tribal rituals and the myths behind them. But there is nothing abstract or theoretical about his style. The book is a memoir of himself when young, with a little ethnology on the side, and it reads like a fairy story—a classic tale like that of Dick Whittington and his cat or Jack and the beanstalk, in which the hero runs away, has adventures, takes odd jobs, skimps and saves for each stage of his improbable voyage, and ends up making his wildest dreams come true.

Like many fairy stories, it begins with a young boy getting into trouble. While gathering coconuts, high in a tree in his native Togo, the adolescent Kpomassie is attacked by a snake, panics and falls, injuring himself badly. His father is a *bokonon*, a priest “in touch with divinities”; he has “a vast

knowledge of plants, their virtues, and the illnesses they can cure," but he is not an initiate into the cult of the python and his cures don't work. So he takes his battered, feverish son to the sacred forest where the high priestess of the python purifies him in a sinister and scary ritual. In return, she demands that when the boy has recovered he should be brought back to the forest and initiated into her holy cult. Kpomassie is outraged as well as terrified, but his father agrees and in Togo a father must be obeyed. The boy, however, is a passionate reader, and while he is convalescing he happens to find a book about Greenland in a missionary bookshop in Lomé. The idea of a country as far from the jungles and fetid snake-worship of Togo as he can possibly imagine—a white, frozen, treeless land where the child is king—bewitches him. When he begins to dream of eternal cold he decides to run away.

For six years he slowly works his way up the west coast of Africa, educating himself by correspondence course and living by his wits, cashing in on his skill with languages by working as a translator and bilingual secretary, and scraping his pennies together for the boat tickets that, port by port, eventually land him in France.

Kpomassie is clearly a man of great charm as well as intelligence because, whenever it matters, the people he meets choose to look after him. In Paris, that most formal of cities, he gets off the train armed only with a letter of introduction and his African belief in hospitality. The man on whose doorstep he lands puts him up for three months. Then a wealthy friend of his host virtually adopts him: he houses him in luxury for a further eight months and helps to finance his Greenland dream. From Paris Kpomassie travels to Bonn where two German ladies whom he meets on the train put him up for a year, rent-free, and he adds another language to his repertoire. His last stop in Europe is Copenhagen, where he works as a dishwasher while he waits for a visa, and learns Danish.

When he finally arrives in Julianehåb, on the southwest coast of Greenland, the Arctic equipment stuffed into his rucksack consists of “an old pair of American army boots . . . an overcoat with a quilted lining, two woolen pullovers, and two pairs of mittens.” The journey from Togo has taken him eight years.

In Greenland he becomes a celebrity from the moment he steps off the boat:

As soon as they saw me, all stopped talking. So intense was the silence, you could have heard a gnat in flight. Then they started to smile again, the women with slightly lowered eyes. When I was standing before them on the wharf, they all raised their heads to look me full in the face. Some children clung to their mothers' coats, and others began to scream with fright or to weep.

An African-American, Matthew Henson, had gone with Admiral Peary to the North Pole in 1909, but that was more than half a century before. Not only is Kpomassie the first black man most Greenlanders have ever seen, he is also, at five feet eleven inches, about eight inches taller than most Inuits. Hordes of children follow this black giant around as though he were the Pied Piper and the national radio announces his arrival on the evening news: “I had started on a voyage of discovery, only to find that it was I who was being discovered.”

The Inuit are hospitable by nature as well as tradition—their doors are always unlocked and no guest is ever turned away—and for a while Kpomassie enjoys their welcome and warmth. It reminds him of Brueghel. But the squalid life in southern Greenland, with its casual, drunken promiscuity

and dependence on government handouts, is not what he had in mind when he set out from Africa: "This was not the Greenland of my dreams. I wanted to live with seal hunters, ride in a sledge, sleep in an igloo! But, apart from two kayaks, there were no seal hunters left in K'akortoq, not a single sledge, not a husky. And not one single igloo!" So he sets out again, traveling steadily north in pursuit of his dream.

Kpomassie is more a novelist than an anthropologist. Although he is fascinated by the local customs and myths, the wild landscape interests him even more and he sees it with a shrewd and eloquent innocence, as though the world were being newly created before his very eyes:

The first snow fell on September 15. So thick were the flakes, you'd have said that all the white birds in the world were shedding their feathers. . . .

On the night of the day the first snow fell I was frightened by a bizarre phenomenon. I was walking home alone and the night was still. Suddenly looking up, I saw long white streaks whirling in the wind above my head. It was like the radiance of some invisible hearth, from which dazzling light rays shot out, streamed into space, and spread to form a great deep-folded phosphorescent curtain which moved and shimmered, turning rapidly from white to yellow, from pink to red. The curtain suddenly rose, then fell again further on. The wind shook it gently like an immense transparent drapery carried by the breeze and drifting on thin air. Its movements were now regular as an ocean swell, now hurried, jerky, leaping and tumbling like a kite. There were continual changes in the intensity, the motion, the iridescent play of colors and the ripples of this strange, gigantic veil that floated through the night sky. I stood watching it for ten minutes, stunned and fascinated. Not knowing what it could be, I rushed home and babbled something about it to my hosts, who didn't bother

to go outside but informed me that I had just been watching the aurora borealis.

Kpomassie is no less fascinated by the people who survive in this beautiful, hostile world and—because he is a man who is motivated, above all, by curiosity—he meets them on equal terms. To the Inuit he himself is a curiosity, a freak, a black man from the tropics, who knows nothing about life in a cold climate. He is also poor, like them, traveling on the cheap. Funds from his adoptive father in Paris arrive infrequently, so most of the time he is reliant on his hosts' two-fisted generosity. Wherever he stops he becomes part of a family: the men take him hunting and drinking, the children dote on him, the women stitch fur clothes for him and take him to bed, according to the custom of the country. And because Kpomassie seems utterly without vanity, the fact that he is educated and polyglot interests him not at all. He is not an ethnologist studying their ways, he is their pupil, learning how to hunt and sledge and make a kayak and survive the implacable cold. Naturally, he learns their language; he also learns to enjoy raw meat and raw fish served with slices of blubber.

Pack ice prevents Kpomassie from fulfilling his dream of reaching Thule, the northernmost settlement in the world, and as far as he could possibly go from the pythons of Togo. Instead, he ends up five hundred miles south, in Upernavik, and makes up for his disappointment by wintering over in one of the few original Inuit dwellings left in Greenland. It is built of earth and stones, covered with turf, entered by crawling through a long tunnel, and when the author first sees it he feels he has come home: "The house vaguely reminded me of an African mud-walled hut; despite its dilapidated appearance, and probably because it aroused some personal memories, I felt an irresistible desire to share the life of its occupants."

His instincts are right and the time he spends with the family of Robert Mattaaq are the happiest and most interesting in the book. Mattaaq is old and destitute and eccentric, but, like Kpomassie, he is full of curiosity. He has papered the inner walls of his hut with articles clipped from picture magazines—he calls it his “library”—and, during the long, claustrophobic winter, he initiates his guest into the universal animism of the Inuit world: not only do all living creatures have many souls, so do the inanimate objects around them:

Every object, every rock, an iceberg, a big stone, even such notions as sleep and food—each has its *inua* (plural *inué*), its “owner.” The word derives from the old term *inuk* (plural *inuit*) meaning “person.” These *inué*, spirits of inanimate things, are not exactly souls but manifestations of the strength and vitality of nature.

Kpomassie has come full circle from the cult of the python, but there is one important difference. Togo is a patriarchy; in Greenland children reign supreme:

Words can't describe the total freedom children enjoy in this country. It is they, rather than the adults, who first adopt the stranger. So the great merit of this people is that in all cases where intuition counts for more than reason, they always recognize and follow the natural instincts of their children.

For Kpomassie, Greenland is the never-never land where children know best, dreams come true, and everyone lives happily ever after. But if his father had thought like an Inuit, he would never have set out on his amazing journey.

—A. ALVAREZ