



## African Silences

*Peter Matthiessen*

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African Silences is a powerful and sobering account of the cataclysmic depredation of the African landscape and its wildlife. In this critically acclaimed work Peter Matthiessen explores new terrain on a continent he has written about in two previous books, *A Tree Where Man Was Born* -- nominated for the National Book Award -- and *Sand Rivers*.

Through his eyes we see elephants, white rhinos, gorillas, and other endangered creatures of the wild. We share the drama of the journeys themselves, including a hazardous crossing of the continent in a light plane. And along the way, we learn of the human lives oppressed by bankrupt political regimes and economies, and threatened by the slow ecological catastrophe to which they have only begun to awaken.

## African Silences Details

Date : Published June 30th 1992 by Vintage (first published 1991)

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Author : Peter Matthiessen

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## From Reader Review African Silences for online ebook

### **Terrie Schweitzer says**

Accounts of three trips to Africa in the company of scientists studying wildlife in 1978-1986. Much of the wildlife has already been decimated (especially evident in the first trip to West Africa (Senegal, Gambia, & Ivory Coast). Matthiessen's keen powers of observation and sparkling prose are here as expected (but not the introspection of "The Snow Leopard"). A generally well-written and depressing book about wildlife conservation. I'd give it 4 stars if it weren't for Matthiessen's annoying commentary of the physiques of African women and often condescending tone. Still, there are some good adventures here and I'm glad I read it.

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### **Charles says**

Not as good as "The Snow Leopard," but a well written work about Africa and the damage that has been done to its animal populations.

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### **Beth says**

Interesting descriptions of traveling in Africa in a light plane 20 years ago. Some of the info is quite dated it's decimating to read of the slaughter of animals -but he is with those who were doing something about it.

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### **James says**

African Silences serves as a time capsule of the conditions of both humans and animals deriving their living from the jungles and rain forests of central and western Africa. I recommend it to anyone who has more than a passing interest in life on Earth.

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### **Barbara Q says**

Written about 30 years ago, elegiac, an adventure story, a travel tale...a glimpse into the heart of Africa. What a life Mr. Matthiessen lived and how fortunate for us that he had such passion for our natural world, along with a gift for writing about it so compellingly.

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### **Lora Stovall says**

I read this book in preparation for a trip to Africa, to some of the same places he visited. He makes it sound like the wildlife was so decimated at the time of his work that I really wonder what we'll find 30 years later.

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## Tim Martin says

*\_African Silences\_* by Peter Matthiessen is a well-written account of three different trips to the continent by the author.

The first essay detailed a trip he made in 1978 to West Africa, accompanying primatologist Gilbert Boese on a wildlife survey of Senegal, Gambia, and Ivory Coast. When the journey began Matthiessen was hopeful, as it was a region he had not previously visited and included such varied terrains as long-grass savanna, forest, and the Sahel, an arid country that stretches all the way east to Sudan, a land of "parched thornbrush of baobab and scrub acacia, red termite hills, starlings and hornbills."

Matthiessen did see some wildlife. In Niokolo Koba, the last stronghold of large animals in Senegal, he spied baboons, several monkey species, several antelope species (such as duiker and waterbucks), hippos, forest buffalo, warthogs and parakeets. Along the Senegalese coast, in a mangrove swamp, he spotted the unusual palm-nut vulture, a striking white bird that lives mainly on the nut of the oil palm.

Largely though the author saw remarkably little wildlife. He noted that some researchers felt that some mammals - such as the black rhino, wildebeest, and zebra - if they ever occurred in West Africa, vanished long ago. Others believed that the poor soil of the region could not support much in the way of large game animals, though Matthiessen pointed out its similarities with the soil of the famous East African game plains. No, West Africa lacks wildlife simply because it is more populous than East Africa and has been inhabited a great deal longer, with people present raising crops of pearl millet and sorghum, burning woodland, and hunting for at least the last 2000 years, competing for the same land favored by the megafauna. In addition, there isn't much impetus to preserve wildlife for the tourist trade as there is in East Africa and also the populous nations of this region are filled with poor, protein-starved desperate people, viewing wildlife as a much needed part of their diet. Indeed in several languages in West Africa the word for "animal" is the same word for "meat." As a result, most of the region has virtually "unobstructed poaching" and in some nations, such as Nigeria, it is unusual to see any live wild animal outside of its one game reserve (the black rhino, giant eland, and all but 9 of its 32 hoofed mammal species have gone extinct in Nigeria).

His second essay takes place in the same year but in Zaire, where the author journeyed to look for the very rarely seen Congo peacock (according to one source at the time only one non-African had ever seen one live in the wild) and the gorilla. After a delay in the broken-down, littered, depressing city of Kinshasa, the author journeyed deep into the forested interior (Zaire is huge, comparable in size to Europe). While Matthiessen got some good observations of gorillas and delighted in some of the animals unique to the highlands, such as the red-faced woodland warbler, regal sunbird, and the L'Hoesti monkey, the peafowl eluded him.

The longest and most enjoyable essay in the book was that describing his 1986 sojourn through Central Africa to determine the status of the small forest elephant of the Congo Basin. Since the savanna or bush elephant (*Loxodonta africana africana*) had at the time been imperiled by rampant ivory poaching, conservationists feared that poachers would turn to the smaller forest race (*L. a. cyclotis*). Ivory trade proponents argued that large numbers of the forest race were hidden in the dense jungle and could continue to support the ivory trade while ecologists feared that in fact the forested interior was inhospitable habitat and forest elephant numbers had always been low. In addition to the importance this would have on getting international support to curtail or stop the ivory trade, researchers wanted to know if there really was a third

race, perhaps even a separate species, of elephant, the pygmy elephant (*L. pumilio*). Did it exist at all? Were they merely smaller members of the more common forest race?

Matthiessen and those he traveled with found many surprises, such as the presence of "bush" elephants deep in the forest. Were they refugees from the ivory trade, wandering individuals who had simply journeyed deep into the jungle, or did they always exist there, perhaps genetic evidence that the now nearly continuous forest was once broken up into a number of refugia, separated by savanna and grassland? They also found many individuals showed characteristics of both bush and forest races, indicating a very wide zone of hybridization and speculated that the "pygmy elephant" was merely a juvenile forest elephant, which as a race had offspring independent at an earlier age.

The entire expedition made for great reading. It was a long one, covering 7000 miles, beginning in Kenya and ending in Libreville, on Gabon's Atlantic coast, largely concentrating on the Central African Republic, Gabon, and Zaire. Made in a light plane, it was a perilous journey, the pilot and the author at the mercy of the titanic thunderstorms of the region, continually having to risk arrest by landing in unauthorized areas to refuel, dealing with corrupt officials, and almost never able to put down thanks to the "awesome inhospitality of the equatorial forest," as any light plane landing in the jungle would "disappear into this greenness like a stone dropped from the air into the sea." The immense forest, "undulating in all directions to the green horizon," a "dark green sea," was, while dangerous to fly over, nevertheless magnificent, containing all the greens in the world - "[f]orest green and gray-green, jade, emerald, and turquoise, pond green, pea green," a land of hard to find but nevertheless remarkable wildlife, including gorillas, chimpanzees, okapi, bongos, buffalo, and such primates as the vervet or green monkey, a carrier for the dangerous "green monkey disease," said to be related to the AIDS virus. Matthiessen also spent some time with a group of pygmies, the Mbuti.

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### **Mike says**

A 3.5 would be a closer score. I have always enjoyed Matthiessen's style, and I enjoyed it here as well, although this isn't "The Snow Leopard" either. I'm sure many things have changed since this was first published... hopefully some for the better. Matthiessen is someone you would love to travel with, and he describes those travels with a passion that carries you along... whether it be to a shower with an attacking mongoose, or in a small airplane facing the wall of a giant thunderstorm.

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### **Marsha says**

travels in east & central africa --

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### **David Ward says**

African Silences by Peter Matthiessen (Random House 1991) (916.04) is a record of trips the author made to Africa in the 1970's in which he documented the disappearance of much of the wildlife of the lesser-known portions of central and west Africa. My rating: 7/10, finished 9/9/13.

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### **Cailin Deery says**

A field diary written by a (poetic) naturalist for naturalists & other extremely patient people who will tire through detailed descriptions of various fowl (peafowl, water fowl, rock fowl), stone partridges, francolins, laughing doves, pranticoles, etc for Matthiessen's tiny shocks of lovely, dreamy description. He's pedantic, meditative and transcendental all the while, which is why it's taken me forever to make any headway. I picked this up right before my parents headed off for the jungles and lakes of Tanzania and, months later, I'm still only occasionally picking it up to read a handful of pages. His writing style perfectly suits the subject: unbroken jungles, impenetrable forests, fetish houses, marginal environments and sub-groups, phantasmagoria, liana-strewn cloud forests and spindly bridges. He wrote this in 1978, but his observation at the time was that East Africa's wildlife was suffering primarily from intensive settlement, while West Africa was suffering because of outright destruction of the animals themselves. Does anyone have recommendations for more timely, non-fiction books on Africa?

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### **Geir Ertzgaard says**

Du kan skille mellom gode og viktige bøker. Denne er muligens enda viktigere enn den er god, men den er god så det holder. Å følge miljøskribenten Peter Matthiessen på tre helt forskjellige reiser på det afrikanske kontinentet er en magisk leseopplevelse, han tar deg til steder du egentlig ikke visste du kunne reise, og han behandler det med en varhet og en respekt som du knapt finner i moderne sakprosa. Matthiessen elsket Afrika, han elsket den afrikanske faunaen, og han skrev om det på en sakte og tankefull måte som både ga meg helt ny innsikt i trusselen mot artsmangfoldet på det afrikanske kontinentet og som forsterket mitt allerede intense ønske om å kjenne dette kontinentet under huden.

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