

“Negro psyche”: The representation of black people in the writings of missionary Olav Guttorm Myklebust

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Abstract

This paper discusses the representation of blacks by the Norwegian missionary Olav Guttorm Myklebust, who worked in South Africa from 1931 to 1939. Although his intention seemed to be to give a friendly and balanced portrait of Africans, Myklebust ended up reproducing and confirming traditional stereotypes. According to him, the primary characteristic of the African mentality is the dominant role played by the emotions at the cost of logic and rational thinking. This suggested a number of presuppositions, namely that Africans were unstable and had only a weak capacity for independent thought. Also, they lived for the moment and displayed little ability to plan for the long term. Furthermore, according to Myklebust, they had little initiative and little endurance when they worked. Africans found it difficult to distinguish between fantasy and reality and to look at things objectively. They also lied frequently and extensively. Emotionally, they were like children. And not least, they lived in constant fear of evil powers, witches, ancestors, magic, etc. These stereotypes formed part of a colonial ideology that legitimated the idea that Africans were mentally, socially, and culturally inferior to Europeans.

The starting point for our discussion is the description of Africans by Olav Guttorm Myklebust, who was a missionary in Africa from 1931 to 1939. He was sent out by the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) and spent much of his time in South Africa as professor at the teacher training college at Umphumulo in Zululand. The annual conference reports reflect the great trust he enjoyed among his missionary colleagues. He frequently made professional academic contributions to the discussions and was elected several times to represent the NMS missionaries at international mission conferences.

The period of Myklebust's missionary work – the 1930s – was a demanding one for the Norwegian missionaries in South Africa, both with respect to issues of mission work and of the general social and political

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development of the country. The issue of establishing an independent church governed by Zulu people caused a lot of discussion and conflict. The missionaries' reluctance to distribute power and leadership to the Zulu was criticised by some of their colleagues and also by the head office of the NMS in Norway.¹ They were criticised for being too slow to hand over power and responsibilities to Africans. The missionaries argued that until the Africans were able to carry the financial burden of all expenses of a church, they were not mature enough to take over leading positions in the church. The so-called Norwegian Zulu Synod did not become independent prior to 1955, more than one hundred years after the arrival of the first missionaries. At the social level the development was characterised by a policy of increased segregation between Whites and people of colour, in particular, Blacks and Coloureds were discriminated against, and which laid the foundation for apartheid when the National Party came in to power in 1948.

One is justified in thinking that Myklebust was well informed about the problems connected with “race” in South African society given the fact he was an educator, and given also the sustained contact with young Africans which this position entailed, his frequent participation in ecumenical missionary conferences and his general interest in academic matters. This is confirmed by a number of articles which he published in Norwegian periodicals about the social, cultural, and ecclesiastical situation in South Africa during the first years after he completed missionary service and took up a research position at Oslo's Norwegian School of Theology (Det teologiske Menighetsfakultet).

The focus of this paper is neither Myklebust's attitude to the policy of segregation nor the race issue in general but rather his representation of black Africans. How does he portray Africans? Are they presented with individual character traits, abilities, and aptitudes? Or does he reproduce traditional stereotypes? After scrutinising Myklebust's representation of Africans, I then discuss his portraying of Africans within the framework of colonial discourse. In this context, it is important to ask what function these representations had in colonial discourse and ideology.

The departure point of this paper and its primary source is Myklebust's 1941 article “The Negro psyche. Sidelights on the black mentality.”² I will emphasise that from my reading of other South African

¹ H. Mellemsæther, “Misjonærer, settlersamfunn og afrikansk opposisjon: striden om selvstendigjøgning i Den norske zulukirken i Sør-Afrika, ca. 1920-1930,” unpublished doctoral dissertation, Norsk University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, 2001, 249-304.

² Norwegian title: “Neger-psyke. Streiflyv over sort sjeleliv”. In the translation of Myklebust's article, the Norwegian noun “menneske,” which means “human being” and includes both men and women, is rendered by the English “man,” which an English-speaking writer in the 1940's would have used

contemporary Norwegian missionary sources there are no great differences between Mylebust’s representation of Africans and other Norwegian missionary portrayals. Until other detailed studies demonstrate that my assumption is wrong, Myklebust should be seen as representative of the Norwegian missionaries to South Africa. My choice of focus is basically pragmatic, in the sense that Myklebust wrote extensively and provided the most explicit discussion on the topic.

When we study historical persons’ attitudes and actions, there is always the danger of anachronism, that is, explicitly or implicitly criticising or judging historical actors on the basis of current knowledge, understanding and common sense. In my attempt to limit this risk it might be useful to introduce one of the main points of Michel Foucault’s book *Archeology of knowledge*. Foucault argues that in any given historical period there are substantial constraints on the manner in which people think, their knowledge, their understanding, and their mode of expression. Every given period has a distinctive discourse that shapes assumptions and sets the limits of human knowledge, understanding, and manner of expression. We are all brought up in and express ourselves in a history of ideas regime that is limited – i.e., a regulated system. Foucault calls such a regime “episteme”.³ The historian’s most important task, according to Foucault, is to uncover or understand the thought patterns that determine and limit individuals in ways they are and are not conscious of. Gary Gutting illustrated this in this way: “So the ‘history of ideas’ – where this means what is consciously going on in the minds of scientists, philosophers, *et al.* – is less important than the underlying structures that form the context for their thinking. We will not be so much interested in, say, Hume or Darwin as in what made Hume or Darwin possible.”⁴

Implied in such an approach is that the main focus is removed from the individual agents and the sources they produced (e.g., texts) to the underlying structure of thought in a given period, which created the conceptual environment for the source produced. One consequence of this method is what Foucault describes as the “marginalisation of the subject”. This does not mean that the individual subject is of no interest, but that it is crucial to emphasise that all historical actors are limited by the thought pattern of their episteme. The aim of the historian is to discover the rules that govern the way the agents express themselves within a given regime.⁵

³ M. Foucault, *Archeology of knowledge*. Trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 211; G. Gutting, *Foucault: a very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 40.

⁴ Gutting, *Foucault*, 33.

⁵ It might be questioned whether Foucault tends to underestimate the individual subject’s potential for innovation and creative thinking or not, and consequently whether his approach

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In this paper I do not intend to conduct an analysis in line with Foucault’s methods. Nevertheless I do find his thinking useful in our context since it is important for historians to bear in mind that in any given period of time there are constraints on how people are able to think. Foucault could help historians and modern readers of historical texts to reduce the risk of becoming anachronistic. It does not follow from this that it is illegitimate for historians to discuss the influence or impact of individual agents on different aspects or periods of history, even though the agents themselves were unconscious of them due to the constraints of the given episteme. With respect to this article, it means that it is legitimate, even important, to discuss the function of Myklebust’s representation of Africans within the framework of colonial discourse and ideology, although he himself did not consider or was unaware of this function due to the universal human condition of being limited by the constraints of a given period.

Putting Myklebust in context

In the introduction to “The Negro psyche: sidelights on the black mentality” Myklebust asserts that “all” agree that there are great differences between the “natural man” and the “cultural man”.⁶ The central question Myklebust addresses in the first part of the article is whether this great difference is due to nature, congenital qualities, or culture (in the sense that the differences are a result of growing up in different environments). It is not by chance that this particular question is raised. The eighteenth century and, more especially, the nineteenth century were periods when scientific theories about race flourished.⁷ From the mid-eighteenth century onward, polygenesis enjoyed considerable favour among Enlightenment intellectuals and scientists.⁸ This theory affirmed that God created by means of a number of acts of creation. It was believed that this could account for the differences between the various ethnic groups: God created white, black and other ethnic groups by means of separate acts of creation. This meant that the races were different by nature. They were in principle different from the very beginning of creation. It was claimed that ethnographic mappings, which measured such things as the

has difficulties in explaining developments and changes that take place in history. It not necessary, however, to go further into that question in this context.

⁶ OG Myklebust, “Neger-psyke. Streifly over sort sjeleliv”, *Kirke og Kultur*, 84 (1941) 338

⁷ N. Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science: Great Britain 1800-1969* (London: Macmillan, 1982) 1-110; J.N., Pieterse, *White on Black. Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 45-51; G. Jahoda, *Images of Savages. Ancient Roots of Modern Prejudice in Western Culture* (London: Routledge, 1999), 63-86; J. P. Jackson and N. M. Weidman, *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2004) 29-96; J. Samson, *Race and Empire* (London and New York: Pearson Longman 2005) 68-72.

⁸ The word “polygenesis” is derived from Greek and means “many beginnings”.

volume of the cranium, the length of the chin, and the height of the forehead, gave support to such positions. For example, Edward Long, a former Jamaican planter and administrator, was influenced by this theory. In 1774 he published a monumental work, *History of Jamaica*, which achieved great recognition. He argued that blacks and Europeans do not belong to the same species. He classified *genus homo* into three separate categories: Europeans and other human beings, blacks and orang-utangs.

[The Negro's] faculties of smell are truly bestial, nor less their commerce with the other sexes; in these acts they are libidinous and shameless as monkeys, or baboons. The equally hot temperament of their women has given probability to the charge of their admitting these animals frequently to their embrace. An example of this intercourse once happened, I think, in England. Ludicrous as it may seem I do not think that an orang-outang husband would be any dishonour to a Hottentot female. [The orang-outang] has in form a much nearer resemblance to the Negro race than the latter bear to white men.⁹

Those who did not accept polygenism held the position known as climatic determinism, viz. that the great differences were due to differing climatic circumstances.¹⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century onwards, polygenism was replaced by social-Darwinist theories of development: the differences between Africans and the European “others” were due to the fact that the African race was of a lower level of development – development is occurring, but this takes an infinitely long time. The theory of evolution consolidated, even strengthened the idea that the African race was backward and inferior to the European race. The difference between the races was explained in biological terms: the Africans were by nature unlike the Europeans.

Eighteenth and nineteenth century African stereotypes, some of which continued far on into the twentieth century in academic reports, travel accounts and the like portrayed the African as an animal in behaviour and appearance, especially when compared to apes. The African was perceived to be wild, indolent, promiscuous, and governed by emotions. He lacked the ability to think rationally; he was lazy and childish.¹¹ With the exception of comparing Africans to animals, by and large one finds the same portrayal of Africans in mission literature sources as in sources of other colonial or travel

⁹ Pieterse, *White on black*, 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹¹ T. Jørgensen, “Norske misjonærer, samtid og forståelse i det 19. hundreåret”, *Norsk Tidsskrift for Misjon* 39 (1985) 75-85; Jahoda, *Images of Savages*, 51-242; Pieterse, *White on black*.

sources. A basic reason for this is that most of the missionaries belonged to pietistic currents that interpreted the creation narrative in Genesis literally. All human beings, including those of less developed civilisations, are created in the image of God, and are in principal equal before God. This means that the missionaries to a lesser degree than colonial agents advocated essentialist theories about race. Differences in cultural levels were something that could be equalised or eradicated through evangelisation and civilisation.¹²

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the issue of the mentality of so-called primitive peoples was much discussed among anthropologists and psychologists. Major contributors to this debate – to whom Myklebust refers or whom he mentions in his article – included Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Paul Radin, Bronislaw Malinowski and Raoul Allier.¹³ Myklebust appeared to be familiar with this debate and points out in particular the question of the difference between the black and white mentalities as the object of much discussion.¹⁴ As previously noted, Myklebust argued that all agree “there is a big difference between the African ‘natural man’ and the European ‘cultural man’.”¹⁵ The disagreement centres on whether this difference is due to nature or culture, innate characteristics or different traditions and environment? Myklebust refers to French sociologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, who launched a theory that “has won no little support”. Lévy-Bruhl argued that there is a fundamental difference between black and white mentalities in the sense that the former is “pre-logical”. Myklebust interprets Lévy-Bruhl as of the opinion that the black mentality “does not possess the ability of abstraction, analysis and systematisation”.¹⁶ Here it is not necessary to discuss whether this is an accurate understanding of Lévy-Bruhl’s theory. It is sufficient to

¹² Jørgensen, “Norske misjonærer”, 81; M. Gullestad, *Misjonsbilder. Bidrag til norsk selvforståelse. Om bruk av foto og film i tverrkulturell kommunikasjon*, Oslo: Univesritetsforlaget, 2007, 28.

¹³ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl’s two books, *Les fonctions mentales dans les sociétés inférieures* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1910) and *La mentalité primitive* (Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1922), in which he termed primitive mentality as pre-logical in contradiction to the scientific logical thinking of the Europeans caused a lot of discussions and opposition. In particular P. Radin, *Primitive Man as a Philosopher* (New York, 1927) published a harsh criticism of Lévy-Bruhl’s conceptions. See also B. Malinowski, “Magic, Science and Religion” in J. Needham (ed.), *Science, Religion and Reality* (London: MacMillan 1925); Idem., *Crime and Custom in Savage Society* (Littlefield: Adams, 1926), and Raoul Allier, *La psychologie de la conversion chez les peuples non-civilisés* (Paris: Payot, 1925); Idem. *Le non-civilisé et nous, différence irréductible ou identité foncière?* (Paris: Payot, 1927).

¹⁴ For an overview of the discussions and the field, see G. Richards, *‘Race’, racism and psychology: towards a reflexive history* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), 160-223 and L. Tingvold, “Lucien Lévy-Bruhl om den primitive mentalitet – en gjenlesing av kritikken og teorien”, unpublished Master thesis in History of Ideas, University of Oslo, 1996.

¹⁵ Myklebust, “Neger-psyke”, 338.

¹⁶ Ibid.

note that for Myklebust, Lévy-Bruhl is representative of those who argue that differences between races are due to biological factors.

Myklebust refers to other scholars, Paul Radin for example, who come to the opposite conclusion. Radin argued that “when it comes to temperament and the ability of logical and symbolic thinking, there is no difference between the cultural man and the primitive man”.¹⁷ According to Myklebust, Radin explains the fact that many have reached the opposite conclusion by stating that this is due to an uncritical application of Darwin’s theory of evolution to the field of ethnology and sociology. Myklebust refers in a parenthesis to other researchers who have advocated similar views. All this means that at the time Myklebust wrote the “Negro Psyche” article, the questions he addressed were a part of an established discourse within the field of race psychology. For modern day readers, the title of the article may seem alien and prejudiced, but this would be an anachronistic reading. Taking into account the contemporary academic debate, there was nothing unusual or especial prejudiced to raising the question or formulating the title in the manner Myklebust did. The “Negro Psyche” article, therefore, ought to be read as a response to an academic debate of that time and era. What makes his article interesting – beyond the fact that it provides readers with an introduction to prevailing scholarly discussion about the mentality of “primitive” people versus European mentality and that it takes a stand in fundamental questions – is the fact that Myklebust introduces his own arguments and views based on his experience as a missionary and his encounter with blacks.

Culture or nature?

As previously noted, in the introduction to his article Myklebust states “all” agree that there are great differences between the “natural man” and the “cultural man”. This “all” likely refers both to voices in the scholarly and academic world of his time, and to voices of those who have lived in Africa and encountered African people and culture. The central question which Myklebust discusses in the first part of the article is whether this great difference is due to nature, congenital qualities or culture (in the sense that the differences are a result of growing up in different environments). As previously noted, it wasn’t by chance that this question was raised. It reflected an ongoing discussion in the field of race psychology. In the debate, Myklebust clearly aligned himself with those who maintained that differences between Europeans and Africans are due to differences in culture and tradition. He finds partial support for his stance in the affirmation of similarly minded researchers, partly in comparative intelligence tests between

¹⁷ Myklebust, “Neger-psyke”, 339.

African and European pupils, and then, in those elements of African traditional culture and intellectual life which reflected the Africans’ intellectual and creative abilities. Intelligence tests “show that the black man is equal to his white brother as far as intellectual abilities and aptitudes are concerned”.¹⁸ Furthermore, Myklebust pays attention to elements in traditional African culture and intellectual life which reflect the Africans’ intellectual and creative abilities such as art, African languages, (which were said to be of equal sophistication to any other cultural language with respect to grammar and vocabulary), poetry, and not least, African religion, which for Myklebust represents “one of the most mighty thought systems of the world”.¹⁹ He characterised the African as a “sharp psychologist”, and as a clever orator and debater. Regarding the latter, Myklebust added that the African is “far beyond us”.²⁰

For the first half of his article Myklebust argues and strives to convince the reader that the differences between “natural man” and “cultural man” are not due to nature or congenital qualities, but rather, are the products of different traditions and cultures (i.e, a result of growing up in different environments). It therefore challenged essentialist theories of race and social Darwinism. His argumentation was not theological; he found support in current academic literature and research as well as in his own observations. When Myklebust disapproved of essentialist theories of race, this was nothing new among Norwegian missionaries to South Africa. Researchers into the history of missions, who have studied Norwegian missionaries in Zululand from the 1850s onward, claim that, in contrast to their contemporaries, they do not display any trace of racism. For instance, Torstein Jørgensen argues that “the missionaries were not racists. On the contrary, they demonstrated a clearly anti-racist attitude as a counter-culture to the extremely racist age in which they lived”.²¹ The perceived absence of racism among missionaries is explained by the foundational idea of God as the creator of all human beings, as well as by the conviction that Africans have the same potential and the same need for conversion and salvation as Europeans. This implied an idea of equality, viz. that Africans and Europeans are brothers and sisters, who all stand in the same relationship to God. Marianne Gullestad wrote that the idea of equality

gave their work a distinctly critical character within the colonial relationships. Besides this, the missionaries were to a

¹⁸ Myklebust, “Neger-psyke”, 340. Here, the Norwegian text has the noun “mann” (man).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Jørgensen, “Norske misjonærer”, 85. One might perhaps question the concept of racism that is assumed by these scholars and ask if they did not operate with a too narrow definition of the concept.

certain extent less inclined to make essentialist formulations than other colonial actors, because they saw inequality as a stage which they actively worked to overcome. Accordingly, their thinking about race was often of a non-essentialist kind.²²

Both the literal reading of the creation narrative and the idea that salvation in Jesus was for all humanity generated a pervasive idea of equality, viz. that all humanity, even those who belong to lower civilisations, are created in God’s image, and therefore, have in principle the same relationship to God. This functioned as a defensive wall against contemporary biological theories about race.

The black mentality

After emphatically disassociating himself from essentialist theories of race and stating that the differences between the “natural man” and the “cultural man” were due to culture rather than to nature, Myklebust went on to emphasise that, nevertheless, there existed “great differences between the black and the white mentality”. The modern reader will have the impression here that Myklebust is afraid that he may be accused of racism. At any rate, he finds it necessary to repeat that this is a question of “differences in the cultural environment, not of a congenital inferiority in the African in his intellectual equipment and his ability to engage in cultural creation”.²³

What then is the significant difference between the “black” and the “white” mentality? The primary characteristic of the African’s mentality is what Myklebust describes as an explosive character. In other words, Africans are governed by emotions at the expense of logical and critical thinking. “The Negro”, he writes, “is much more strongly dominated by his feelings – i.e. by emotions and instincts and impulses – than we are. The emotional element constitutes the essential feature in his psyche”.²⁴ This alleged emotional aspect to the African mentality is the starting point for Myklebust’s discussion of the characteristics of this mentality. The dominant role played by the emotions is the fundamental difference between the black and the white mentality (to keep to his own terminology). Here he appeals to the authority of Professor Raoul Allier, whom Myklebust quotes and describes as “one of our age’s greatest authorities in the field of racial psychology”. According to Myklebust, Allier has offered the following “brilliant” description of the black mentality:

²² Gullestad, *Misjonsbilder*, 28.

²³ Myklebust “Neger-psyke”, 342.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 345

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The African does not choose between ideas. He merely wobbles between two ways of acting. And when he rejects the one and decides in favor of the other, this is not done on the basis of a rational reflection, but is the result of inner stimuli which in a mysterious manner come together and generate this action.²⁵

Myklebust believes that this accords with his own experience from South Africa, and he supports this claim by presenting a number of comparisons which attempt to show how the dominant role of the emotions takes concrete form in the African’s way of life.

First of all, this can be seen in the African’s attitude to life, which is marked by laughter, *joie de vivre* and nonchalance. Africans live for the moment and do not worry about the future. According to Myklebust, the consequence of this attitude is that they “enjoy life” as long as they have food and drink, and that they do not save anything for the future, with the result that they may have to go without food for days on end. Myklebust can well understand why a missionary to Africa wrote in his autobiography that he never dared to preach about the New Testament text that says one should “take no thought for the morrow”.²⁶

Secondly, the dominant role of emotions leads to an unstable element in the black mentality, which manifests itself in a lack of perseverance. Myklebust criticises European employers for racial arrogance when they complain that black workers show neither initiative nor a sense of responsibility. He asserts that he has had only positive experiences with the Africans he has worked with. At the same time, he insists that there is some “truth in the claim that the Negro lacks initiative and perseverance”. To illustrate this point he quotes a missionary colleague who had labourers and said of Africans: “If they have food, they don’t need to work. And if they don’t have food, they cannot work!”²⁷ Why do Africans have this attitude to work? In answering this question, Myklebust provides at least three answers. One is that they make few demands on life and are easily satisfied. Secondly that work in the European sense is something relatively new to them. Another factor is that the climate has made them sluggish. But he also explains the African’s attitude of aversion to work by referring to “natural aptitudes” and therefore seems to be operating with an essentialist understanding of race and nature. This is surprising, since he earlier used significant writing space to dissociate himself from such theories.

²⁵ Ibid., 344.

²⁶ Ibid., 345.

²⁷ Ibid., 346.

Thirdly, instability in the black mentality can be seen in their lack of long-term planning and perspective. “A work which demands independent thinking and long-term planning seems not to come naturally to the African.”²⁸ This statement is given as the explanation of why there are so few black dealers in Africa. Most dealers were Europeans, Arab or Indians. Fate is the one factor Myklebust identifies that intensifies the effect of the emotional trait in the African mentality with regard to independent thinking and planning – what happens irrespective of what a human being plans or does not plan. Myklebust describes fate as an “indefinable ‘impulse’ which determines the entire life of the Negro”.²⁹ The conviction that fate predominates leads to a fatalistic element in the African mentality, with negative consequences for independent, rational thinking and planning. The same is true of a strong faith that the divine world makes its will known through dreams.

Fourthly, the instability can be seen in the lack of a sharp boundary between reality and fantasy. According to Myklebust, even during the daytime, the African has something dreamy about him, as is evident in his lively imagination and in his “underdeveloped sense of proportion”. This makes it difficult for him to distinguish between fantasy and reality, and this in turn means that his attitude to the truth is not “entirely irreproachable”. “One ought not to place too much reliance on the testimony of a Negro. It is difficult for him to be objective and sober.”³⁰ Myklebust thus constructs a connection between genuine dreams and day-dreaming. Through his genuine dreams, the African is governed by an irrational element. Similarly, there is an irrational and fantastic element in his understanding of what happens in reality.

Fifthly, Myklebust reasoned, the instability in the black mentality can be seen in the fact that Africans are skilled in art and creative activities such as music and literature and that they are born actors. Here he clearly presupposes a connection between a richly developed emotional life and aesthetic interests and abilities.

Finally, the dominant position of the emotions is manifested in Africans’ great sense of humour. They have a highly developed sense of humour, and they are very fond of funny stories and riddles. A great sense of humour not only is a striking aspect of black mentality, but has been a necessary resource for the Africans during periods of unjust sufferings throughout history. According to Myklebust, their sense of humour is the “negro’s force par excellence”, and it is owing to it that the African has “preserved his soul”, without discussing any further what that means.

²⁸ Ibid., 347.

²⁹ Ibid., 347.

³⁰ Ibid., 347.

In colonial discourse, it was customary to describe Africans as children.³¹ Myklebust reflects this when he says that “we often call the blacks ‘big children’”.³² He himself believes that this is not completely wrong, since we find traits in the African that are typical of children: “an immediate joy of life, a rich emotional life, and an exuberant imagination”.³³ These so-called aspects of the African mentality have already been discussed, and we should note that they were all associated with a lack of rational and logical thinking. The immediate joy of life in effect means an inability to plan for the future, or an inability to see the consequences of what one does, e.g. in the case of food. A rich emotional life was thought to be an expression of the explosive element in the black mentality. This is presented as the antithesis to a European mentality; one structured around reason, logic, and critical thinking. The same applies to the African’s lively imagination. Myklebust draws attention to the “brilliant memory” of the Africans and to their inquisitiveness.

An immediate joy of life, laughter, and a carefree attitude to life, which characterised the African – and which, as we have seen, are connected to the strong emotional element in their nature – could lead us to believe that they are the happiest people in the world. But according to Myklebust, a more accurate knowledge of the circumstances of their lives reveal that under the happy and nonchalant surface, fear and pain hold sway. Fear, then, is the African’s fundamental experience of life: “The decisive element in African religion and morality is fear. The Negro’s life is one in constant fear ... The Negro lives constantly in fear of magic powers ... The Negro’s life is one long nightmare of fear and terror ... the Negro cannot be said to lead a happy life. He is a captive in the prison of fear.”³⁴ Fear is connected to African religion. The African is always on his guard against enemies – evil powers, ancestors, and witches. The picture of the African’s life that Myklebust constructs is far from appealing, and this picture functions as an indirect imperative to intervene in order to free Africans from “the prison of fear”. It is the Christian religion that will deliver them. “There is one solution only – the Gospel.”³⁵

Myklebust introduces the question: Is it legitimate for Christians to “force” their faith on Africans? He does not, however, enter into a principled discussion about this issue, but rather, restricts himself to emphasising how terrible the situation is in which the African is confined. This statement serves to justify Christian mission, for it is through the Gospel that Africans become liberated from their prisons. He asserts: “By means of the conversion

³¹ Jørgensen, “Norske misjonærer”; Jahoda; *Images of savages*, 51-242.

³² Myklebust, “Neger-psyke”, 347.

³³ Ibid., 347.

³⁴ Myklebust, “Fra frykt til fred. Afrikansk religion – afrikansk kristendom” *Kirke og Kultur* 84 (1941), 421-423.

³⁵ Ibid., 422.

the African is removed to a complete other world. For the African it represents a radical change, a transition from fear to peace, from prison to liberty.”³⁶ In this context we leave the interesting question of to which extent this description reflects the Africans’ own experience, but limit ourselves to note that, according to Myklebust, the Christian religion constitutes the solution. In other words, Africans lead a gloomy life, a life of fear and darkness. They themselves do not possess the solution to their problem: they need someone from the outside to take responsibility and intervene. Myklebust and other missionaries are therefore indirectly presented as good helpers who free the Africans from a situation which they themselves cannot resolve.

Myklebust’s representation of Africans in the context of colonial discourse

One might summarise the most important aspects of Myklebust’s representation of Africans as follows: In contrast to European mentality, which is characterised by reason and logical thinking, the black mentality is governed by emotions, by an explosive character. This was a commonly held view among scholars in the field of race psychology during the first decades of the twentieth century. So when Myklebust emphasises this particular aspect of black mentality, governed by emotions, it is in no way an odd or striking idea. On the contrary, it is in agreement with a dominating position in contemporary research. The emotional dominance in black mentality manifests itself in many ways: in instability in the African’s character; in weakness of independent thinking; in a lack of capability for long-term planning and perspective given that they live for the moment; in his lack of perseverance in work; in his difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality; in his weak capability to approach an issue in an objective way. The African lies too much and the African is as a child. Furthermore, the Africans have a well developed sense of humour and are skilled in art and creative activities such as music and literature. All these qualities are connected to the basic nature of black mentality, that it is governed by emotions at the expense of rational thinking. In spite of his humour and apparently carefree attitude toward life, fear is the African’s fundamental experience of life due to belief in magic, witchcraft, ancestors etc. The African’s life is a long nightmare of fear and pain.

Myklebust’s intention is to paint a nuanced and well disposed picture of Africans. He balances negative characteristics and qualities by bringing out positive aspects of the African mentality. It is important for him to make clear his rejection of essentialist theories about race, that is, differences in

³⁶ Ibid., 423.

14 “*Negro psyche*”: *The representation of black people in the writings ...*

mentality, character, and aptitude are due to culture, not nature. At the same time, however, Myklebust operates within a colonial discourse in which he both hands on and confirms stereotyped representations of “the others”, i.e., ideas such as Africans are governed by emotions; they have little aptitude for logical and rational thinking; they are incapable of planning for the future; and they are like children. These stereotypes, like the others mentioned above, were part of a colonial ideology that legitimated and consolidated asymmetrical relationships of power between Africans and Europeans. The prevailing stereotypes legitimated the assumption that Africans were mentally, socially, and culturally inferior to Europeans, and as a result of this inferiority, Europeans were entitled, indeed obliged to subjugate Africa and to bring the European Christian civilisation to it. In short, the stereotypes functioned as a legitimisation of the colonial project and of the relationships of power which were established in this context.³⁷

This is not the place to discuss the relationship between missions and colonisation, or between missionaries and colonial powers. In the present context it suffices to note that Myklebust’s description of the Africans reflects and reproduces established stereotypes, which then helped establish and consolidate colonial power structures. For example, the description of Africans as children was frequently used both in secular colonial sources and in missionary sources.³⁸ The portrayal of Africans as children implied various connotations. Gustav Jahoda gives the following summary:

On scanning a wide range of references to savages which employ the child image from the early 19th century onwards, it becomes clear that the predominant conceptions expressed or implied were those of immaturity, lack of responsibility and inability to properly order one’s own affairs. The underlying message is that savages, like children, cannot be trusted to behave sensibly. Therefore, just as children require the guidance of their parents, so savages need that of civilized Europeans ... If Europeans stood, as it were, *in loco parentis*, this also implied certain obligations on their part in helping the ‘children’ to grow up by seeking to stamp out undesirable (from the European cultural perspective) beliefs and practices and to introduce more wholesome ones.³⁹

³⁷ LL Snyder, “The Idea of Racialism: Its Meaning and History, in E. Cashmore and J. Jennings, eds., *Racism. Essential Readings* (London: Sage Publications, 2001) 91-97.

³⁸ For a discussion of the background, the emergence, and the use of the idea that Africans are like children, see Jahoda, *Images of Savages*, 131-193.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

Unlike other missionary sources, Myklebust does not directly affirm that blacks “have to be very dependent on their missionary”.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, when taken together, the images or descriptions he employs to represent the African mentality imply that Africans need guidance and help from whites in order to be able to develop in a positive direction and to have a better life. Just as it is the parents’ responsibility to direct children, who are impulsive and emotional and have poorly developed abilities to think rationally and to plan for the long term, so it is the task of the Europeans to educate and guide the Africans so that they may become more like Europeans.⁴¹

Myklebust clearly agrees with those within the field of race psychology of the first decades of the twentieth century who rejected essentialist race theories. Differences between the “natural man” and “cultural man” are due to culture. He obviously intended to give a nuanced and balanced presentation of the Africans in the sense that he referred not only to what he considered to be negative aspects of African culture and mentality, but also pays attention to elements that he considers positive. Notwithstanding his intention, when he discusses the great differences that “all” agree exist between Africans and Europeans, he hands on and reproduces established colonial stereotypes. Therefore he also contributes to the re-establishment and consolidation of stereotypes, which in turn, function as a legitimising of the West’s perceived political and cultural superiority over Africa. Despite his intention to produce a nuanced and friendly picture, he himself, his own life, and his cultural environment were so tightly woven into the reigning colonial structures and ideology that traditional stereotypes took precedence in his portrayal of Africans. Myklebust’s representation of Africans, therefore, illustrates the fact that any agent operates in a given “episteme” with its constraints upon how people think. To use the words of G. Gutting, it shows that “individuals operate in a conceptual environment that determines and limits them in ways of which they cannot be aware”.⁴² It would be anachronistic to criticise Myklebust on the basis of our twenty-first century understanding and the way of expression of our time. Simply put, Myklebust was a child of his time as we are children of our time. This does not imply, however, that one should abstain from exploring the function of his representation and the representation of the missionaries in general of Africans within a colonial ideology and context.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 145.

⁴¹ Gullestad, *Misjonsbilder*, 30 writes that the missionaries “often regarded ‘tradition’ as childish, in relation to one particular understanding of ‘modernity.’ And children are viewed as natural and innocent, with a special role in the before-and-after narrative of religious conversion. For example, adults can be seen as children who grow out of paganism thanks to the work of the missionaries. Africans have been portrayed as children, and the missionaries as their parents. These metaphors indicate something of the content in the social relationships”.

⁴² Gutting, *Foucault*, 33.

The Norwegian missionaries’ contradictions

In conclusion, one might briefly consider if there is any connection between Myklebust’s portrayal of Africans (which I assume is generally and collectively representative of NMS missionaries in southeast Africa) and how the missionaries handled the two major challenges they faced. First, let us consider the issue of establishing an independent Zulu church. As noted in the introduction, in the 1930s the missionaries were reluctant to distribute power and leadership to indigenous Christians. They were influenced by and took as a goal the so-called “Three-Self” movement – to establish native churches that would be self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating. The three-self principle constituted a major element in the NMS’s strategy, as it did in many other conterminous Protestant mission societies.⁴³ The missionaries’ basic argument against establishing an independent native church was that the Zulu were not able to carry the expenses. Therefore the church could not practically become self-supporting. According to missionaries the Zulu were not sufficiently mature to govern their own churches. One might ask, however, to what extent the reluctance of the missionaries was influenced by, at least as an unspoken presupposition, the kind of stereotypes expressed by Myklebust? It seems likely that hegemonic assumptions and portrayals of Africans, such as their limited capacity for rational thinking, their inability to plan long-term and their childlike emotionalism, influenced the missionaries’ attitudes and positions toward the establishment of an independent Zulu church. A second great challenge was the policy of segregation and the increased discrimination against non-whites. One might ask a similar question with respect to the question of how and to what extent such stereotypes influenced the unconscious assumptions, attitudes and passive response of the Norwegian missionaries, first, to the policy of separation and the increasing colour bar during the 1930s, and later on to the apartheid politics of the late 1940s and 1950s.⁴⁴

⁴³ Mellemsæther, “*Misjonærer*”, 119-20, 311-13.

⁴⁴ On the missionaries’ response to apartheid in the 40s and 50s, see H. B., Agøy, “Den tvetydige protesten. Norske misjonærer, kirker og apartheid i Sør-Afrika, 1948-ca. 1970”, master thesis in history, University of Oslo, 1987, 89 -167 and Idem, “The Freedom Struggle in Southern Africa: The Role of the Norwegian Churches 1948-1994”, in T. L. Eriksen, ed., *Norway and National Liberation in Southern Africa* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2000), 276-281. The heading of Agøy’s discussion of the missionaries’ position on apartheid is “Neutral Mission”.

