

# Nils Astrup and Indigenous African Cultures: A Study in Evolving Missionary Attitudes

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## Abstract

It has often been alleged that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries European missionaries evinced little respect for the indigenous peoples whom they evangelised and otherwise sought to influence through Christian ministry. Considerably less frequently, however, have such assertions been substantiated with detailed case studies to demonstrate possible attitudinal shifts over time as the missionaries in question became better acquainted with African cultures and folkways. The present article, a response to M.M. Sepota's 'The Destruction of African Culture by Christianity' which was published in the *Southern African Journal for Folklore Studies*, examines the attitudes of one key individual, Hans Astrup, who headed the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission from his arrival in Natal in 1883 until he felt confident about expanding his agency's field into what are now Mozambique and Swaziland.

**Keywords:** Nils Astrup, Norwegian Missionary Society, Schreuder Mission, missionary attitudes, Zulus

## Introduction: The Man and His Mission

The precise nature of the impact of missionary Christianity on African societies has been debated by anthropologists, missiologists, African politicians, and others. That the establishment of viable—and in many cases quite large—churches throughout much of Africa coincided with an erosion of traditional culture has prompted reactions varying from indignation to

gratitude and from resignation to resistance. The dynamics of these responses have not always followed predictable lines. To be sure, African nationalists representing many cultures have often stood at the forefront of criticism of foreign missionary endeavours, but both colonial and post-colonial African societies have given birth to internal critics who have pointed satirical pens at the foibles of their own traditions. At the same time, colonising lands spawned both staunch defenders and severe critics of the imperial undertaking. These general phenomena have been manifested in both the missionising churches in, for example, Europe and North America, and the churches which have arisen in Africa. Indeed, internationally missiologists have long crossed verbal swords over the defensibility of undermining indigenous cultures in the interest of extending the borders of Christendom. Two results of this broad issue have been a massive scholarly literature about it in several languages and the incorporation of relevant components in missiological education. In many countries prospective missionaries are routinely compelled to come to grips with issues of cultural interaction they can expect to confront them in the field and, in many cases, strongly encouraged to respect those dimensions of indigenous cultures which do not conflict with the doctrines and practices they are offering to the peoples whom they shall evangelise or otherwise meet.

Nevertheless, the interplay of missionary endeavours and traditional African cultures remains widely misunderstood. One of the consequences has been to fall into the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy and attribute to the intrusion of Christianity the transformation of beliefs, mores, social practices, and the like without always proving cause and effect relationships between the two.

Complicating discussion of this issue are a host of non-missionary factors as the presence of 'Western' secular forces, such as economic structures, modes of transport, European clothing, and electronic forms of communications and entertainment alongside the missionaries, internal forces of change within Africa, and the loosening of the grasp of traditional folkways that often occurs when urbanisation takes place in many parts of the world. The failure to consider these powerful social and ideational determinants has caused many an observer of African transformation to fall into the trap of attributing arguably far more to the foreign bearers of Christendom than can be empirically demonstrated.

In 1998 M.M. Sepota of the University of North published a critique

of missionaries' lack of respect for traditional African culture. Focusing on certain dimensions of sub-Saharan African spirituality and responses to the advent of Christianity, he sought to cast a broad net and accordingly stated his argument in generalised terms which his evidence hardly began to support. Sepota asserted, for example, that in South Africa 'most people are not at peace with themselves and this might be the reason why our country is unstable' (Sepota 1998: 23). Taking his penchant for generalisations to an international scale, he also contended that on the African continent 'most blacks have tended to believe that everything said and practised by Christians is perfect and unconditionally acceptable' (Sepota 1998: 23), an assertion which might befuddle generations of frustrated missionaries who laboured in the field without effecting nearly as many conversions to Christianity as they had hoped, a theme which has run like a scarlet thread through reports and letters from various African countries for nearly two centuries. It would also surprise historians who are familiar with the various 'Missionary, go home!' demands that have cropped up from time to time as accompaniments to African nationalist movements. Turning to indigenous beliefs, Sepota quotes uncritically a Master of Arts dissertation by J.R. Maibelo dealing with the place of religion in the teaching of Northern Sotho poetry to support his case that 'all societies in black Africa have the notion of a Supreme Being who is responsible for the existence, workings and continuation of all creation, no matter the different names used to address him' (Sepota 1998: 23). These and other sweeping statements suggest that Sepota's case rests on an assumption of the cultural homogeneity of Africans, or at least black sub-Saharan Africans, and their religions. Indeed, he even refers specifically to 'the African religion' and nowhere indicates that there is more than a single, overarching faith (Sepota 1998: 24). More specifically, Sepota cites indirect or mediated approaches to the Supreme Being, veneration of ancestral spirits, and divination as the essential components of this indigenous religion which has merely assumed different forms amongst the peoples of Africa (Sepota 1998: 24).

The present writer questioned the generalised nature of his conclusions in an article dealing with attitudes in the Norwegian Missionary Society (Hale 2000). In the present article it is my intention to take further steps towards an empirical approach to missionary attitudes by exploring the perceptions of Nils Astrup (1843-1919), a crucial figure who led the Church of Norwegian Schreuder Mission (which owed its existence to a schism in the

Norwegian Missionary Society during the early 1870s), from 1883 until shortly before his death. So profound was his influence and that of his progeny that for decades their organisation was colloquially known in some circles both in Norway and the Union of South Africa as the 'Astrup Mission'. The relationship of Nils Astrup to the Zulus and other African peoples also merits consideration because in 1889 he undertook a three-month trek from Zululand through Swaziland to the Limpopo River and subsequently published his observations of indigenous folkways, languages, religious beliefs and practices, and related matters in a book which, in response to repeated requests from South African and European scholars, I have recently translated and edited. That volume sheds appreciable light on a host of matters of missiological, historical, and other scholarly interest. It is one step in the direction of redressing scholarly neglect of Astrup. His predecessor, H.P.S. Schreuder, has been the subject of numerous studies, most notably those of the eminent Norwegian missiologist Olav Guttorm Myklebust (Myklebust 1980; Myklebust 1986). Astrup has been relatively overlooked as has, for the most part, the history of the missionary organisation which he served, in sharp contrast to the saga of the Norwegian Missionary Society. A consideration of his evolving attitudes towards the African peoples to whom he ministered for some four decades is a particularly fitting point of departure. This complements such existing scholarship as exists about such intimately related matters as the early history of Norwegian Lutheran missions to the Zulus (Jørgensen 1988) and the present writer's translated edition of Norwegian missionary correspondence from South Africa (Hale 1997). It also challenges certain widely accepted theories about missionary activity as the handmaiden of colonialism by pointing out that one cannot simply assume that individual missionaries uniformly supported imperial expansion or regarded the extension of European hegemony over Africans as beneficial to the latter.

It should be stated at the outset that the perspectives of missionaries like Astrup were far from objective or dispassionate and that they tended to place indigenous African culture at a disadvantaged position in the eyes of these European newcomers to the continent. Instruction in geography was weakly developed in Norway until well into the twentieth century, and during the period under consideration Norwegian children were taught only generalities about foreign lands. Africa fared poorly under the pens of the men who wrote nineteenth-century Norwegian schoolbooks. Ludvig Kristian

Daa's *Udtog af Geographien* (i.e. Elements from Geography), for instance, went through many printings and for decades influenced young Norwegians' perceptions of the African continent and its peoples. This slender volume reveals more about its author's ignorance about Africa than it does about Africa itself. That 'immense peninsula': as Daa described the continent, supposedly lacked high mountain ranges; consequently, 'there is little variation in temperature on the African landscape. Nearly the entire continent belongs to the hottest regions of the world'. Even its ostensibly few fertile areas, he cautioned, are 'unhealthy, indeed lethal, for Europeans'. The indigenous African peoples seem particularly unsavoury in Daa's book, which probably helped to shape prospective missionaries' expectations of the men and women whom they planned to evangelise. 'The actual Negroes and Kaffirs are semi-wild barbarians', he declared. 'Some tribes are as anarchic as the American Indians' (Daa 1875:122-130). One could multiply examples, but they would only confirm the negative image of Africa which was inculcated in the minds of young Norwegians during the nineteenth century and which those who became missionaries presumably brought with them to Natal and Zululand.

The impressions of H.P.S. Schreuder (1817-1882), the first ordained missionary whom the Norwegian Missionary Society commissioned to work among the Zulus, are particularly noteworthy in this regard because of the influence he had on many colleagues for nearly three decades after his arrival in Natal in 1844. A man of firm opinions who was not given to rhetorical restraint, this orthodox Lutheran wrote in a generally critical vein about Zulu folkways during his first few years in Africa. Some of his severest words were used to express his utterly skewed perceptions of the indigenous spirituality of the Zulus, which he devoted the next thirty years of his life to replacing with Christianity. 'Their entire concept of anything supernatural is united with their belief in or, more correctly, fear of witch-doctors and witches', Schreuder asserted. 'In many aspects of life they assume the mysterious, supernatural influence of a foreign power. If sickness or death strikes people or cattle, it has been caused by magic power, and if a witch-doctor (*nyanga*) does not undertake to remove the evil, or the witch is not exterminated, one must move to another place'. Zulu marital practices met with Schreuder's early disapproval. He reported that 'polygamy prevails among them, as do the evils which result from it' and judged that 'the wife is the slave of her husband' in part because of the custom of *lobola*. Standards

of personal morality scandalised this young ordinand from a rural area of western Norway. ‘One of the darkest facets of the Zulus’ character is their terrible immorality’, he generalised. ‘They are so given to profanity that every other word that comes from their mouths is an oath. They swear by their deceased kings Shaka and Dingane’. Further lowering Schreuder’s estimation of the Zulus, ‘The propensity for dishonesty is so entrenched in them from childhood that it is difficult for them to grasp how wrong it is. One can hardly believe half of what they say in unimportant matters, and in matters in which their personal interests are involved one cannot believe a single word without having additional information’<sup>1</sup>.

At the same time, however, Schreuder expressed admiration about certain traits he perceived amongst the Zulus generally. He noted that ‘by nature they are well-endowed’ and in terms of natural musicality easily surpassed most Europeans. The interpersonal relational skills of the Zulus were sufficient for Schreuder to declare that ‘by nature they are very sociable’ and ‘they receive each other very hospitably’. Moreover, despite his censorious attitude towards Zulu morality in general, Schreuder insisted that ‘there are probably few places where one is less vulnerable to theft than in the Port Natal Colony and Zululand ...’<sup>2</sup>. Yet these concessions on his part pale in comparison with his vilifying comments during the 1840s which presaged recurrent themes in Norwegian missionary reports and letters from the field, including those which Astrup penned.

Turning to Astrup, crucial to an understanding of his ethnic attitudes is an awareness of the limits of his respect for contemporary European culture. He did not always think in terms of the simplistic binary polarities of good and evil, civilised and uncivilised, and so on that have long been a prominent feature of colonial discourse theory. To be sure, this theologically conservative cleric regarded European culture as essentially superior to the cultures of Africa, but apparently only because of the differing extent to which Europe and Africa had been influenced by Christianity. He was keenly aware that the traditional religious foundation of European society was being severely eroded during the nineteenth century and that by the 1880s, the

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<sup>1</sup> H.P.S. Schreuder (Umhluti) to Norwegian Missionary Society, 1 May 1846, in Norwegian Missionary Society Archives, box 130, folder 1.

<sup>2</sup> H.P.S. Schreuder (Umhluti) to Norwegian Missionary Society, 1 May 1846, in Norwegian Missionary Society Archives, box 130, folder 1.

decade often regarded as the ‘breakthrough of modernity’ in Scandinavian cultural and intellectual history, various secular and radical currents had begun to undermine the ecclesiastical life of northern Europe. In one of his first reports from his station Untunjambili near the Tugela River, Astrup implicitly made clear both his judgmental attitude towards traditional Zulu culture and his displeasure with the recent course of European civilisation. ‘The germinating culture here in the colony [of Natal] is not being carried forth by the revolutionary, anti-Christian spirit as in Europe’, he reported with relief, ‘because here one sees in Christianity an ally of civilisation against the barbarism and darkness of heathendom. And as subjects of a foreign, English government the ignorant, heathen children of Africa put the cultural radicals of Europe to shame in terms of their loyalty. One can therefore breathe more freely here, because the atmosphere is not burdened by a clammy, anti-Christian spirit’. Astrup did not venture firm predictions which foresaged the southward drift of the centre of Christendom during the twentieth century, but he clearly sensed that such a movement might have begun. ‘Hapless Europe’, he lamented. That ‘overcultivated’ continent, this expatriate declared, was witnessing the ‘rejuvenated arrogance of paganism’ gaining new footholds<sup>3</sup>.

Born in Solør, Norway, near the Swedish border in 1843 as the son of a minor governmental official, Nils Astrup was privately tutored for his university entrance examination, which he passed with the distinction *laud* in 1860. Six years later he received his *candidatus juris* degree, also with *laud*, at the Royal Frederik University in Kristiania (since 1925 called Oslo), the Norwegian capital. From 1866 until 1869 Astrup pursued a bureaucratic career, but, feeling called to enter the Christian ministry, returned to his *alma mater* to study theology. His *candidatus theologiae* was conferred, again with *laud*, in 1877. While pursuing his second round of university studies, he married Anna Catharina Agatha Ursula Thurmann, a pastor’s daughter, and taught at a Lutheran boarding school in the nation’s capital. Astrup sired no fewer than nine children, four of whom died young. He served as a parish pastor in Norddalen from 1879 until 1882. After learning of Schreuder’s untimely death, Astrup dimitted his Norwegian ministry and accepted an appointment as head of the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission,

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<sup>3</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 12 (December 1883), pp. 181-182.

notwithstanding his lack of experience in Africa or as a foreign missionary elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. He, his wife, and their children sailed to Africa in 1883.

## Initial Impressions of Ethnic Groups in Southern Africa

Astrup's initial impressions of the non-European peoples of southern Africa occurred shortly before he reached Untunjambili. Almost immediately after disembarking at Cape Town, where the *Warwick Castle* was anchored for a few days before continuing to Durban, Astrup encountered a much greater degree of ethnic pluralism than at any previous time in his life. His initial report of this dimension of South African life revealed some measure of respect for the non-European peoples whom he saw there: 'One sees not only the plump figures of the children of Africa, but also often faces featuring Arabian or Malay fineness and regularity. The coloured<sup>5</sup> children are generally attractive and cheerful to look at'. Indicative of Astrup's concern for their spiritual welfare, however, he lamented that many of the Africans in Cape Town had converted to 'Mohammedanism'. On a more optimistic note, Astrup was pleased to report, though incorrectly, that most of the Protestant churches in Cape Town were Lutheran. His perception may have stemmed from his brief association with a German Lutheran clergyman, Carl Hugo Hahn, who had been a missionary to the Herero in German Southwest Africa (subsequently Namibia) but since 1874 had been ministering primarily to Europeans in Cape Town. In harmony with his own keen linguistic interests, Astrup was especially impressed by Hahn's *Grundzüge einer Grammatik des Hereró (im westlichen Afrika) nebst einem Wörterbuche*, which had been published in 1857<sup>6</sup>.

Astrup and his family then continued to Durban, and both that bustling port city and its Zulu population impressed him deeply. In a letter to the leadership of the Schreuder Mission he described the urban flora in

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<sup>4</sup> Joh. K. Bergwitz (ed.), *Studenterne fra 1860* (Kristiania: W.C. Fabritius & Sønner A/S, 1910), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> The Norwegian term is *farvede*, which in this context means indigenous African, not 'Coloured' as used in the ethnic nomenclature of South Africa to indicate people of mixed race.

<sup>6</sup> Nils Astrup (Cape Town) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 4 June 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 7 (July 1883), pp. 101-102.

glowing terms. ‘If death did not exist, the depraved and sensual human race here would soon forget about Heaven’, Astrup feared. Indian ‘coolies’ promptly caught his attention as the ‘most colourful’ element in the polyglot population of Durban, a city whose streets he found ‘much more attractive and civilised’ than those of Cape Town. ‘They are dark, attractive, slim people of slight build, erect as candles, with figures which are hardly inferior to those which inspired sculptors in Italy and Greece’, he judged. They soon left Durban and, after a four-day journey by train and ox wagon past seemingly endless sugar cane fields and other unfamiliar sights, reached Untunjambili in northern Natal before the end of June<sup>7</sup>.

Less than two months after arriving at what would be his home for most of the remainder of his life, Astrup wrote at length and in generally favourable terms about the Zulus to whom he had begun to minister. Indeed, this middle-aged Norwegian, himself by all accounts an impressive physical specimen, lauded their appearance without reserve. ‘The Zulus are a remarkably well-formed race’, he declared. ‘Both male and female young people often possess great beauty’. Astrup did not begrudge them their pride in their appearance; indeed, he thought it quite understandable that they flaunted their physical attributes by assuming suggestive postures and wearing what to his Norwegian eyes seemed like degenerate clothing. The classically educated newcomer alluded to ancient Greek mythology to describe what he thought most modern artists had failed to convey through their drawings of the Zulus: ‘While the coolies remind one of the shapes with which Mercury and Venus are represented, the Zulus remind one of Apollo and Diana. But the young girls are also reminiscent of bacchantes, because they seem to be fed copiously in order to command a high price’. Astrup tempered his praise of the Zulus’ physical attributes by noting that although ‘the vast majority of the youth are perfect representatives of beauty and strength’, the adults tended to be fat and loosely built, while the elderly people were emaciated. But in the main the vigour of the indigenes clearly impressed him, not least their skin colour, compared to which ‘all Europeans look sickly’<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 27 June 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 8 (August 1883), pp. 114-115.

<sup>8</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 11 (November 1883), pp. 162-163.

At the same time, however, Astrup began to register misgivings about certain dimensions of Zulu culture. Central to his criticism, and that of many other missionaries, was his rejection of polygyny. At that point he did not analyse what he clearly regarded as the moral demerits of this matrimonial system. Instead, he merely asserted that if it were not for polygyny, 'most Zulus would quickly convert to Christianity'. Astrup put his hope in the plough as the panacea for this 'worst enemy' of the faith. Its introduction, he reasoned, would render the maintenance of numerous hitherto hoe-wielding wives superfluous, and male farmers, finding it too costly to continue to feed their surplus womenfolk, would dismiss them, thereby effectively putting an end to this venerable Zulu institution and, presumably, paving the way for much greater acceptance of Christianity, which was known to oppose it<sup>9</sup>. Astrup did not comment on other possible consequences of the abrogation of polygyny in this way, such as its possible social and economic implications for the discharged wives and their children.

### **Bestowing Further Responsibilities on Zulu Converts**

Far from fluent in the language of the Zulus only a few months after entering their domains, in 1883 Astrup prudently refrained from posing as an authority on their culture. Indeed, in correspondence to the leadership of the Schreuder Mission in Norway, he underscored the difficulty of probing what was long known as 'the native mind', especially with regard to issues involving land tenure and its relationship to nationhood in the wake of the disastrous Anglo-Zulu War of 1879, in which British forces defeated those of King Cetshwayo, captured that monarch, and occupied his realm. 'In the civilised countries it is difficult to understand or empathise with the views of African tribal peoples', Astrup explained. He related that in Zulu culture the monarch was not only the supreme authority but also the acknowledged owner of everything, including his subjects. Accordingly, kingdoms and principalities rested primarily on historic tribal boundaries, while geographic borders played only secondary roles. Long-term ownership of specific pieces of land thus had a different and less important meaning to the Zulus, he thought, than it did to

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<sup>9</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 11 (November 1883), p. 162.

Europeans<sup>10</sup>. This perception was of seminal importance to Astrup's theorising about future evangelisation in southern Africa.

Precisely how Astrup anticipated conducting his missionary endeavours is not recorded, but not long after reaching Untunjambili he revealed in broad terms to the leadership of the Schreuder Mission how he thought it might be possible to proceed. Fundamental to his strategy was his belief that the Zulus and many other tribes in southern Africa were quasi-nomadic and his conviction that this dimension of their way of life could help to propagate the Gospel. To be sure, from the outset Astrup assumed that the Schreuder Mission required additional Norwegian personnel. Writing from Untunjambili in August 1883, he insisted that in order to serve effectively as a missionary he must have 'more pastoral and teaching assistance'<sup>11</sup>. At the same time, however, it seemed self-evident that much of the impetus must come from the mission field itself, and that, in his mind, was geographically expansive. As early as 1883 Astrup clearly thought in terms of the evangelisation not only of Zululand but also of central Africa, which had gained much international attention since the days of David Livingstone. 'Pray, cry, and scream that God will send workers to His harvest, not just two or ten, but thousands', he implored supporters of the Schreuder Mission, adding immediately that Africa could provide them. 'How else can we get this vast, glorious country Christianised', Astrup asked rhetorically, 'if we cannot get its own sons to go out as the consummate missionaries? They are familiar with conditions, languages, the climate, etc.' He conceded that the eventual expulsion of the European personnel of the Schreuder Mission from tumultuous Zululand was conceivable, but it appeared unthinkable that Africans themselves could somehow be driven out of Africa<sup>12</sup>. This was the germ of his vision of a partly indigenous evangelistic endeavour which underlay much of his subsequent activity as a missionary to the Zulus and inspired his strategy, which was never really implemented, of using Zululand as the gateway for propagating Christianity farther north.

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<sup>10</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 12 (December 1883), pp. 179-180.

<sup>11</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 11 (November 1883), p. 162.

<sup>12</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 20 August 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 12 (December 1883), p. 181.

To be sure, the employment of African personnel in the mission field was by no means a new idea in the 1880s. For many years various missionary agencies, including the Norwegian Missionary Society and the Schreuder Mission, had appointed Zulu evangelists to assist European personnel. Such men would play an increasingly important rôle in conducting worship at out-stations, evangelising in kraals, participating in educational ministries, and taking responsibility for other dimensions of broadening programmes of ministry. Eventually many would become theologically educated and ordained. What is distinctive in Astrup's call shortly after he arriving in the land of the Zulus, however, was the geographical scope of his vision to employ converts outside their own cultural-linguistic regions. This notion of realising the evangelisation of wide expanses of Africa remained in Astrup's mind for many years and before the end of the 1880s prompted him to consider in some detail how it might be implemented.

Before turning to that matter, we can consider briefly certain elements of Astrup's attitudes towards the Zulus which he acquired during his first year amongst them. One was a cautiousness borne of the perennially turbulent political situation after the conquest of Zululand in 1879. On the one hand, Astrup clearly developed a measure of respect for certain traits he observed among the Zulus and even found similarities between them and Norwegians. To cite but one example, this transplanted son of rural Norway regarded the older Zulu women as quite sociable and, when they gathered for conversation, reminded him of their counterparts in both the Norwegian capital, Kristiania, and in the modest lounges of Norwegian farmhouses. On the other hand, Astrup occasionally reported that he did not feel comfortable in the presence of large numbers of Zulus with whom he was not familiar, especially at night. Before the end of 1883, for instance, he described in a letter to the leadership of the Schreuder Mission one of his first nights in the kraal of such people, whom he called 'Africa's savages' (*Afrikas Vilde*). Given the resentment against British colonial officials, Astrup regretted allowing his beard to grow long and feared that because of it some of the Zulus might mistake him for an Englishman. In the same report, however, he revealed something of his ethnic prejudice and attitude towards the religious dimensions of race relations: 'I am certain that the heathens feared us and the white man's mystical superiority (besides the two spears and the revolver with which, owing to their experience [at the hands of the British cavalry] they always imagine a white knight to be equipped); but this fear is from the

Lord. May His name be praised'. Yet under the circumstances Astrup was gratified that the conquered indigenous population had extended hospitality to him and his small entourage and wondered whether under similar circumstances 'civilised people and Christians' would have behaved any better<sup>13</sup>.

### Complicating Attitudes after Several Years among the Zulus

As the decade of the 1880s progressed, Astrup tended to evince a more critical attitude towards the Zulus in general. Writing in 1886, he described their lives as being 'in many respects childlike and naïve but also basically empty and God-forsaking'. The basis for this assessment is not fully clear. Astrup sent a very detailed description of Zulu folkways to a Norwegian newspaper, but it went missing before it could be printed. While attending to a wealth of duties he subsequently wrote a only summary of it in which he criticised the basis of their rural economy as one reason for what he interpreted as self-imposed limitations on their standard of living. During part of the year the Zulus had abundant food, Astrup observed, but at other times they existed on a sporadic diet of small birds, herbs, and an occasional antelope. To this Norwegian, it seemed unfortunate that fishes were regarded as an 'abomination' in Zulu culture, since the Tugela River was full of them. 'They prefer to starve for a few months rather than adapt to proper agriculture', he judged, tempering his criticism by noting that the Zulus were quite capable of working hard when they felt like doing so. Turning to the lifestyle of young men, when they were in their kraals and not toiling for white men in order to earn money to pay their taxes, Astrup thought they generally enjoyed a carefree existence. At those times their days consisted largely of sleeping, eating, taking snuff, talking, drinking beer, smoking *nsango*, hunting, and courting. The last-named activity, he observed, 'frequently included much that was not innocent', adding that the same could be said of similar activities 'back home in Christendom'<sup>14</sup>.

Astrup's assessment of the receptivity of the Zulus to the

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<sup>13</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, 19 September 1883, in *Missionsblad*, no. 1 (January 1884), pp. 5-10.

<sup>14</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, undated, in *Missionsblad*, no. 1 (January 1887), pp. 3-5.

proclamation of Christianity during the latter half of the 1880s is especially germane. In 1886 he drew a fundamental geographical distinction which related directly to varying degrees of European political hegemony and cultural influence. In Natal, Astrup was pleased to report, there was appreciably more openness than hitherto to the Gospel. He attributed this both to the belief of many Zulus that they would ‘be subjugated and disappear more rapidly if they do not begin to adapt to white civilisation’ and, clearly more gratifyingly to him as a missionary, to ‘a more or less craving for God, the Christian God, which they feel is stronger than everything they themselves worship or in any case that in which they place their trust’. Counterparts in the Norwegian Missionary Society at Umpumulo, south of the Tugela, agreed with him about an increasing desire to hear the Word of God. But in the defeated Kingdom of Zululand, by partial contrast, ‘the old national heathendom and arrogance’ were still evident. Astrup faulted what he perceived as the often too ‘mild’ English governance of with regard to unspecified ‘heathen customs’ for this and thought that by disciplining the Zulus more severely ‘the Boers’ were ‘taming and humbling the natives’ and thereby indirectly serving the missionary enterprise. Even in Zululand, he reported, the Gospel was being met with less resistance than had been the case a few years earlier<sup>15</sup>.

## **Attitudes Towards Other Ethnic Groups on an Exploratory Trek**

Under Astrup’s leadership, the Schreuder Mission continued to operate on a small scale throughout the 1880s with regard to its budget, number of European personnel, and geographical size. By 1889, however, Astrup felt confident to press ahead with his dream of co-ordinating evangelisation on a much broader basis. In an epistolary article to the Norwegian press, he revealed to the public that ‘for several years’ he had contemplated using the Zulus themselves as ‘a base of operations and staging area for a plan to open the way for the Gospel to reach related tribes to the north through missionary journeys’. At that point, some five and a half years after his arrival in Natal,

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<sup>15</sup> Nils Astrup (Untunjambili) to the Church of Norway Schreuder Mission, undated, in *Missionsblad*, no. 1 (January 1887), pp. 6-7.

Astrup did not appear to have ventured outside the region inhabited by members of this tribe. His heavy burden of preaching, teaching, and administrative duties had prevented widespread travel beyond the immediate environs of Untunjambili. He believed that ‘all the way from ancient Ethiopia down to the Cape’ it was ‘easy for these peoples to understand each other’, a crass oversimplification which nevertheless highlighted a pivotal point of his strategy. The assumption of vast, intertribal cultural and linguistic unity also pointed to one of the factors motivating his concern for the rapid propagation of the Gospel throughout much of East Africa. Decrying the advance of ‘the invading Europeans’ and the moral degeneracy which he believed was an inherent accompaniment of colonialism, Astrup reasoned that for the indigenous peoples ‘salvation from disaster and decline under such conditions—and in accordance with all experience—will be possible only if the Gospel is brought to them in abundance and they accept it abundantly’. Apparently believing that European imperialism had already had deleterious effects on much of South Africa, he took heart in his perception that north of the Limpopo River vast tracts remained largely unaffected. Astrup warned, however, that time was of the essence, and that missionary expansion in that region had to be accelerated: ‘If it is to make an impression on the people as people, it must take the lead rather than follow hard on the heels of European civilisation, which generally brings more of the sins than the virtues of the whites to any country where it suddenly and violently intrudes’. Such rapid evangelisation, he argued, required the deployment of large numbers of evangelists who were thoroughly familiar with the ‘customs, folkways, and languages’ of the targeted ethnic groups. To assay the feasibility of this strategy, Astrup announced, he was planning to undertake a three-month exploratory trek through Swaziland and into Portuguese East Africa later that year<sup>16</sup>.

The expedition was not exclusively on the part of the Schreuder Mission but had the endorsement of other Lutheran agencies in southern Africa. In early May 1889 Astrup met at the Norwegian Missionary Society’s Umpumulo station with other Norwegian as well as Swedish and German counterparts in that Protestant tradition to discuss the matter and received not only their moral but also their financial support for the undertaking (Astrup

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<sup>16</sup> Nils Astrup, ‘Til Venner af det mørke Fastlands Oplysning’, *Morgenbladet* (Kristiania), 14 February 1889, p. 1.

1891: 1-2).

The trek through parts of Zululand and Swaziland into Portuguese Africa and back to the point of departure lasted nearly three months, *i.e.* from 17 June until 14 September 1889. Most of the historically significant details of it obviously lie outside the scope of the present article but emerge from Astrup's account of it, which he published in 1891 under the title *En Missionsreise til Limpopo gjennem Zululand, Swaziland og Tongaland ind i Riget Umgaza* (*i.e.* A Missionary Journey to the Limpopo through Zululand, Swaziland and Tongaland into the Kingdom of Umgaza). For present purposes it is sufficient merely to state that he and his eight-person entourage (consisting of his foster son Karl Døving and seven Zulu porters), together with three donkeys, travelled chiefly on foot through generally difficult terrain and encountered a relatively broad spectrum of African ethnic groups as well as English and Afrikaans-speaking settlers, Indian traders, and Portuguese colonial officials. Astrup took along a large quantity of textiles which he traded with varying degrees of success for food and other provisions. *En route* to Portuguese East Africa he preached frequently in kraals where he and his fellow travellers were sometimes hospitably received but occasionally turned away or only grudgingly tolerated.

From the outset of the expedition, and in accordance with his perception of his overall missionary endeavours in Africa, Astrup clearly regarded himself as a pioneer participating in a divinely inspired errand into regions which were relatively unsullied by European immorality but also as yet not graced by the salvation of the Gospel. Presumably owing both to his racial prejudices and his generally negative view of non-Christian Africans, Astrup emphasised that he might encounter local resistance on the trek. He summarised the anticipated perils as 'malaria, wild people and animals, accidents, etc.' (Astrup 1891: 5). In harmony with the authoritarian strain in his personality and his *de facto* position of responsibility, Astrup clearly assumed command of the Zulus whom he had employed to serve him on the trek, and he brooked no conduct which smacked of inefficiency or indolence on their part.

Despite the many favourable comments Astrup had made about the Zulus shortly after his arrival in Africa, by no means did he embark on his exploratory expedition with a generally positive or dispassionate perception of African peoples in general. While still in Zululand, he encountered abundant evidence to confirm his conviction that in their lifestyles most of its

indigenes had not yet attained full humanity as he understood that concept, and clearly he believed that his mission included the obligation to declare this to them. ‘In various respects the natives of Africa who are living in their native state resembled animals and plants with regard to the arrangement of homes, clothing, ornamentation, etc.’, he wrote from the defeated kingdom. “You are not animals, but human beings”. I say to them. ‘You therefore ought to seek your image in God and not in animals. For your heart’s desire things other than your bellies. You want to live and not die. You want happiness and not pain. Why do you not seek lasting joy, but tomorrow you die? Furthermore, many things prevent you from enjoying the brief pleasures of the body – “sorrow, death, illness, tribulation from your superiors, as you say, hunger, fear of war, etc.”’ (Astrup 1891: 18).

Astrup understood that his expedition depended on the reliability of his Zulu porters, and at places in his narrative he acknowledged their indispensability. Furthermore, when some of them suffered from malaria, he treated them and evinced considerable concern for their well-being. At times, however, the seeming indifference of a few of these poorly paid employees tested his patience by failing to follow his directions or, without his permission, deviated from stipulated routes and thereby impeded the progress of the trek. On at least two occasions Astrup threatened to dock their compensation for such insubordination, though whether this ever became more than an idle threat is not recorded. In any case, shortly after the party left Untunjambili he resorted to a well-worn practice by inflicting shame on two independent-minded porters who had followed a different route and thus become separated from the others for a day. Astrup upbraided these ‘stragglers’ in the presence of their colleagues and derided them as ‘children’. ‘I also declared that I hoped the others would not embarrass me as these two had done’, he wrote (Astrup 1891: 15). In another incident much later on the expedition while the group was staying at a large kraal, a different porter, Unkomo, had spent the night in a hut separate from that to which they had been assigned and was not present to depart with the others the following morning. When he was finally found, Astrup vowed in the presence of the entire entourage that ‘he would get it with a whip made of rhinoceros hide (*sjambok*) if he pulled that stunt again’. The Norwegian wrote that Unkomo was ‘very embarrassed and thought the corrective was very mild’. In his account Astrup justified his handling of the case by stating that ‘the people in the kraal found it quite understandable that because of the malaria I was

doubly afraid if someone from our group disappeared'. Underlying his strict treatment of his entourage was undoubtedly an attitude of superiority and authority as well as a conviction that a venture into foreign territory inhabited by other ethnic groups and rife with malaria was potentially hazardous and thus required him to maintain a great degree of control (Astrup 1891: 176).

Astrup's general perceptions of black Africans during the 1889 expedition are complex and defy simple categorisation. In places his narrative reveals intense frustration with his porters.

He admitted that it was difficult for him to endure what he called their 'indolence' and lack of honesty. 'It is difficult, when one is doing everything to behave honourably, and then must tolerate continual deceit and lies on their part', wrote Astrup, who illustrated the point by citing instances of porters simply disappearing whenever the group arrived at a kraal and local inhabitants failing to deliver food they had promised. He had no patience for their efforts to trivialise what he perceived as repeated violations of trust. 'They also have the ugly habit of always replying, when one requests something, whether it is justified or not, 'Kude', meaning in Zulu, "that is nothing", and adding in a kinder tone, "white man's son" or "my friend"' (Astrup 1891: 176).

On the other hand, Astrup could go to considerable lengths to counter what he realised were widespread misconceptions of African behaviour. Seeking to debunk the belief that Africans rarely show gratitude, he recounted an incident that had occurred the previous year in Kimberley, where explosions and fires in mines had taken a heavy toll in human lives. One 'raw native', Astrup related, had sequentially carried three unconscious white men to safety. In response to words of thanks and a gift of gold, this black hero had tearfully explained that he had not expected any reward but had acted merely because the stricken men were his masters. 'Emotions do not often come to expression among the natives in a visible way', Astrup generalised dubiously in attempting to explain a cultural difference between his Norwegian readers and Africans. In a surprisingly sophisticated flourish, he suggested that 'those who are so quick to judge the native African should first make comparative psychological studies'. Reflecting another overarching European attitude, however, Astrup immediately added that such intercultural understanding could never be complete: 'I maintain that the ways in which the life of feelings and thoughts move in the black man will probably always be an unsolved psychological riddle for us' (Astrup 1891:

37-38).

Astrup expressed a similar sentiment in his narrative after a conversation in Swaziland with an ill and angry British settler named Smith who was thoroughly disgusted with the failure of two of Astrup's servants to get up early in the morning, fetch water, and prepare coffee. Smith had reportedly told his Norwegian visitor that he 'would never put up with that kind of "niggers"' and asserted that they were 'never grateful'. Astrup agreed that his employees had 'made a disgrace' of themselves that day but counselled his host not to pass categorical judgment on them: 'The black man's customs and way of thinking are different from our own. Many of them sincerely believe in Christ, and that is shown when they die cheerfully and without fear. Our white virtues, on the other hand, are often more acquired habits' (Astrup 1891: 36).

There were, to be sure, limits on the liberality of Astrup's own attitudes towards the ethnic groups whom he encountered on his expedition. He found it burdensome, for example, to be 'in the midst of the indolent, indifferent Tonga race' and irritating when their 'women answer us with a lot of shouting in their own language without caring whether we get food' (Astrup 1891: 136). Astrup gave an intertribal Nguni people of Tonga and Zulu descent north of Swaziland mixed marks but in general found them less appealing than the Zulus. The women in this group, he judged, had inherited 'friendly, round faces' from that side of their lineage and relatively slim figures from their Tonga parentage. Tempering his appreciation of their appearance, Astrup commented disparagingly on their decayed teeth. By contrast, he noted, this oral feature was 'the adornment of the Zulus'. Whether the tooth decay in question could be attributed to inappropriate diet or polluted water Astrup was uncertain. In the end he expressed gratitude that the local men had 'an open, honest, and stout appearance' and that they were 'very polite to foreigners' (Astrup 1891: 68).

Echoing a sentiment which resounded from many other missionaries of his own and other eras, Astrup attributed the degeneracy of some of the tribes whom he met to the baneful influence of alcohol, and he faulted European traders for exploiting local peoples by selling them highly intoxicating beverages. Repeatedly he called attention to widespread alcoholism, especially in parts of Swaziland. There, Astrup stated bluntly, he had encountered a 'liquor hell'. The evidence of heavy drinking was readily perceptible not only in the large numbers of empty bottles strewn about in

some of the kraals but also in the ‘lazy, hard, indifferent faces and the derisive expressions and laughs of the women, many of whom were tall, thin, middle-aged, ugly people with protruding heads, and whose shrunken nakedness stood out all the more because of the peculiar costume of Portuguese plaid cotton from their hips to their knees, and in many cases down to their ankles’. In some areas, Astrup inferred, ‘liquor had often driven food out of the houses’, many of which had been emptied of most of their owners’ saleable possessions (Astrup 1891: 43-44).

Astrup was clearly sensitive to certain other elements of the international stereotype of African peoples and attempted to dispel them. In doing so, however, he revealed yet again that after six years in southern Africa he was not entirely free of prejudicial attitudes about its inhabitants. At an early stage of the expedition he and his entourage were briefly guided by an itinerant traditional healer who insisted that a tribe called the ‘Matyambana’ practised cannibalism. ‘They kill passers-by and give the bellies and chests to their king’, Astrup reported (Astrup 1891: 23). Subsequently, while enjoying Shangana hospitality in the eastern Transvaal, he found it remarkable that these people feared another tribe, the Jopi, and avoided entering its domains for fear of being slaughtered. Unspecified Shangana insisted that ‘the Jopi eat human flesh. Here you will find a man with a piece of an arm, there with a piece of a leg, which they rush away in order to throw it into the pot. They also cut the throats and other parts off the corpses and hang them up to dry; they also eat human blood and drink beer from the skulls of their enemies’ (Astrup 1891: 103). Precisely how Astrup reacted to this blood-curdling explanation at the time is not known. He discussed the matter with a seasoned English settler named Barnett, however, who assured him that the Jopi were ‘a very peaceful race’ and ‘no more cannibals than are the Shangana themselves’. Yet Astrup may have inadvertently perpetuated part of a stereotype by quoting Barnett’s belief that among the Jopi ‘human flesh is used only as medicine’ (Astrup 1891: 114). What this entailed he did not specify and perhaps did not know.

## **Conclusion**

This consideration of Astrup’s recorded attitudes towards certain African peoples with whom he interacted during the 1880s touches on only key elements of what were undoubtedly a massive number of conflicting

perceptions. It underscores, however, that this prominent and scholarly Norwegian missionary did not have a unitary view of the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa and that his evolving attitudes towards them cannot justifiably be dismissed as merely disrespectful or condescending. Beginning with laudatory comments, most of them understandably focusing on physical appearances, immediately after setting foot in the Cape and Natal in 1883, he eventually expressed himself with far greater nuances which defy facile categorisation after gaining some familiarity with Nguni cultures. To be sure, Astrup regarded the best of European civilisation as superior to much of what he found in Africa, but he emphasised just as strongly that the worst dimensions of European life (some of them, in his view, undoubtedly springing from the failure of his ethnic brethren to live in accordance with the moral precepts of their Christian spiritual heritage) were destroying African lives. This, in Astrup's opinion, was a matter of personal and social ethics, not a political question. He is not known to have criticised colonialism as such and probably thought that whatever harmful effects it had undoubtedly inflicted on Africa it had also helped to open the door to the Gospel. That Astrup was an authoritarian personality who insisted on maintaining control in a paternalistic manner over his Zulu employees and who did not mince words in exhorting Africans to dispense with their traditional religious beliefs and practices in favour of Christianity is beyond dispute. Any consideration of missionary attitudes in their historical context, however, which takes account of him must also take heed of the noteworthy wrinkles in the fabric of his ethnic views.

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