

Norwegian missionaries and Zulu converts: a case for Bakhtinian dialogue

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Abstract

From the arrival of the missionaries in 1844 to the outbreak of the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879, the results of the Norwegian missionary enterprise in Zululand were meagre. The British annexation of Zululand changed the situation, and the missionaries perceived the first decades of the 20th century as “a long great harvest”. A closer examination of the source material challenges this understanding. By using dialogical theory, as propounded by Mikhail M. Bakhtin, as a starting point, we may come closer to explaining the missionaries’ relative lack of success. Bakhtin stated that each utterance has an addressee and that the speaker formulates the utterance with the addressee and his/her future reactions in mind. If we envisage the encounter between Zulus and Norwegians accordingly, we find that the Norwegian missionaries failed to recognise that the two cultures were engaged in ongoing dialogue and negotiations.

Introduction

During a period of approximately 150 years, from the mid-19th century to the end of the 20th century, Norwegian missionaries were sent out to Christianise the Zulus of South Africa. Our knowledge of this encounter, at least in the earlier period, depends mainly on texts written by the missionaries. Because of the scarcity of Zulu accounts on the one hand and the abundance of Norwegian accounts on the other, there is an obvious risk of presenting a biased view on the encounter between these two cultures. The vast majority of the sources are written in Norwegian; hence the researcher will typically be of Norwegian origin and as such be positioned within a Norwegian or Western European tradition. The risk of lopsidedness thus tends to become a rule.

In order to fulfil the ambition of bringing the African participant into the centre of the study – together with the missionaries – dialogical theory seems to be a relevant course of action. I will therefore begin with an intro-

duction to dialogical theory, and then give a presentation of the two parties involved. This is followed by examples of dialogue, in a broad sense, between missionaries and Zulus.

Dialogical theory

The classical conception of discourse analysis takes several assumptions for granted when it comes to relations between the participants in a discourse. One of these is that social interaction “is designed [...] to acquire or exert some kind of influence upon others’ behaviour (to make them act in a given definite way) and thoughts (to make them think or believe something in particular)”.¹ As the missionaries came to South Africa with the explicit purpose of converting Zulus, aiming to make them believe something in particular, the classical thesis may seem suitable for our purpose. But the classical thesis implies a monological perspective, ignoring the fact that communication is a “genuine co-operative process by which the interlocutors carry out a mutual sense-making activity resulting in a joint production of new (and at least partly shared) meanings”.² The question of collaboration, interpersonal practice, and mutual empowerment – *the dialogical perspective* – is absent. Classical discourse analysis could certainly contribute to a deeper knowledge of Norwegian mission in Zululand, but the Zulus would have been perceived as little more than passive objects of the missionaries’ evangelisation efforts. In order to provide a more truthful picture of the encounter between missionaries and Zulus, we must pursue a broader scope.

During the last decade social scientists have questioned the classical conception of discourse, advocating alternative conceptions with emphasis on mutuality and dialogue. As early as in the 1920s, however, the Russian thinker Mikhail M. Bakhtin expressed related thoughts.³ Bakhtin’s work is diverse and complex, and Bakhtin-specialists have consequently asked, in order to reveal the essence of his work, if it is possible to trace a thorough-going perspective that covers this diversity. According to Tzvetan Todorov and Michael Holquist, two of the most prominent Bakhtin-connoisseurs, the most accurate and fundamental notions to describes Bakhtin’s thoughts are

¹ Eric Grillo (ed.), *Power without domination: dialogism and the empowering property of communication*. (Amsterdam : John Benjamins, 2005), viii.

² Ibid., xi.

³ Mikhail M. Bakhtin (1895-1975) was unknown outside the Soviet Union almost until his death. When his ideas became known in the Western world, he was soon hailed as “the most important thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century.” See Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: the dialogical principle* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), ix.

the *dialogical principle* (“principe dialogue”) and *dialogism*, respectively.⁴ In Bakhtin’s view, linguistic research underestimated, or even completely ignored, the communicative function of language: “Language is regarded from the speaker’s standpoint as if there were only *one* speaker who does not have *necessary* relation to *other* participants in speech communication.”⁵ In opposition to seeing communication as a connection between a subject (the one who speaks) and its object (who listens to the speech), Bakhtin stressed the dialogical perspective. The listener takes up an active stance vis-à-vis the speech. He/she agrees or disagrees, supplements the speech, uses it or prepares to act upon the basis of its content. The understanding of all kinds of living speech comprises an active answering position. Thus communication is not a question of a subject (the speaker) – object (the listener) relation, but must be understood as two subjects in dialogue, a dialogue between “I” and “the other”, between Zulus and missionaries.⁶

The basic unit in speech communication is the *utterance*, and all utterances are, says Bakhtin, dialogical. Irrespective of how monological an utterance might appear, it is unavoidably an answer, in some way or another, to what has already been said. The utterance is, however, more than a mere answer to precedent and existing utterances, it does also anticipate future utterances. The utterance has an addressee and is formulated with the speaker’s conception of this addressee and with his/her future reactions in mind.⁷ It is not merely between whole distinct utterances that Bakhtin recognises dialogues. Dialogues are also present within one utterance, since other persons’ words or utterances can be included as foreign speech in a new utterance. More, if we move from a micro level to a macro level, from investigating the particular words in an utterance to exploring human cultures in the world, the approach must still be dialogic. According to Bakhtin, “a human act is a potential text and can be understood (as a human act and not a physical action) only in the dialogic context of its time (as a rejoinder, as a semantic position, as a system of motives)”.⁸ Contrary to a prevailing understanding that we, in order to comprehend a foreign culture, must get on the inside of this culture and consider the world with an inward perspective,

⁴ Michael Holquist, *Dialogism. Bakhtin and his world* (London: Routledge, 1990), 15; Mikhail M. Bakhtin/Rasmus Slaattelid, *Spørsmålet om talegenrane* (Oslo: Pensumtjeneste, 2005) 47-49. Reprint. (Originally published Bergen: Ariadne, 1998).

⁵ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “The problem of the speech genres”, in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds) *Speech genres and other late essays. M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 67.

⁶ Ibid., 68f.

⁷ Ibid., 92, 94.

⁸ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, “The problem of the text in linguistics, philology, and the human sciences: an experiment in philosophical analysis”, in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds) *Speech genres and other late essays. M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 107.

Bakhtin underlines the necessity of outsideness. A certain knowledge of an involvement in the other culture is of course needed, but a foreign culture can only be completely uncovered and explained through the eyes of an outsider:

A meaning only reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another foreign meaning; they engage in a kind of dialogue. [...] We raise new questions for a foreign culture, ones that it did not raise itself; we seek answers to our own questions in it; and the foreign culture responds to us by revealing to us its new aspects and new semantic depths.⁹

To sum up: By taking dialogical discourse analysis as a starting point, it is evident that the Zulus were not just passive objects of the missionaries' vocation; they were subjects, engaged in a dialogue with the missionaries. Rather than to perceive the relation between the missionaries and the Zulus solely as a question of power, it is more in correspondence with reality to acknowledge that the two cultures mutually influenced each other. Just the fact that the missionaries were obliged to learn isiZulu in order to carry out their vocation confirms the relevance of this perspective. The Norwegians translated the Biblical scriptures and psalms into isiZulu, conducted church services in isiZulu and evangelised in isiZulu. No matter how monological the approach may seem, the missionaries could not avoid taking the Zulus' response into consideration, thus creating a dialogue.

Bakhtin's dialogism does, however, explicitly highlight the relational perspective. Meaning is situated, it is a relational phenomenon. The historic-cultural context within which a phenomenon occurs determines the characteristics, the meaning and the understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, in order to understand the dialogue – in a broad sense – that took place between Zulus and missionaries, knowledge of the two parties and their time is required.

The Zulus

The Zulu kingdom emerged in the beginning of the 19th century. By 1816 Shaka ka Senzangakhona had obtained chieftainship over a Zulu clan comprising approximately 1500 people. In the following years he led successful wars against neighbouring tribes, and in the course of only a decade, the relatively small chiefdom had expanded into becoming "the most formidable power in south-east Africa".¹⁰

⁹ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, "Response to a question from the *Novy Mir* editorial staff", in Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (eds) *Speech genres and other late essays. M.M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 7.

¹⁰ Jeff Guy, *The destruction of the Zulu Kingdom. The Civil War in Zululand, 1879-1884* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1994), xviii.

The vast majority of the Zulus lived in largely self-sufficient homesteads and their livelihood on farming and livestock breeding. A Zulu homestead was circular. Several beehive style houses, constructed of wattle and thatch, surrounded the village's inner circle, the cattle kraal. The fundamental importance of cattle to the Zulus is underlined by the kraal's position as the nucleus of the homestead. The cattle were not simply food; cattle were the wealth of the village, used for dowry and essential for performing rituals and ceremonies in veneration of the ancestors. The huts were inhabited by the homestead head, his wives and their children. Labour within the homestead was divided according to sex: men were in charge of the livestock, whilst farming was the responsibility of women. Tens of thousands of such homesteads, over which the king exercised his authority, were scattered over Zululand.¹¹ The kings' residence was much larger than the other homesteads; it was not only a production community, but also the home for members of the army regiments. The power of the Zulu king was founded on the regiments, and during Shaka's reign his regiments became "the most effective fighters in the region".¹² Young men were enlisted in an age-grade regiment from the age of sixteen, serving the next 20-25 years as warriors. Approximately a third of a man's life was spent in the regiments before the king would give him permission to marry. The king exercised social, economic, political and reproductive control over all his subjects through the regiments. Christian life could hardly be combined with this kind of military service, and King Cetshwayo (1826-1884) considered a Christian Zulu to be Zulu spoiled.¹³

Shortly after having reached its peak in the late 1820s, the existence of the Zulu kingdom was challenged. Boers from the Cape Colony moved north, in search of new land and to avoid British rule.¹⁴ Towards the end of the 1870s, the existence of an independent African kingdom with a large black population caused a growing concern among the British. The Zulu kingdom was increasingly considered an obstacle to peaceful development in the region and in January 1879 Britain invaded Zululand. After several months of

¹¹ Ana Maria Monteiro-Ferreira, "Reevaluating Zulu Religion: an Afrocentric analysis", *Journal of Black Studies* 35/3 (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, January 2005), 350; Guy, *Destruction*, 9-12; Anna Buerud, *The King and the honeybirds. Cyprian Bhekuzulu kaSalomon. Zulu nationalism and the implementation of the Bantu authorities system in Zululand, 1948-1957*, unpublished Masters thesis in history, University of Oslo 2007, 22f.

¹² John Laband, "The rise and fall of the Zulu kingdom", in Benedict Carton, John Laband and Jabulani Sithole (eds), *Zulu identities: being Zulu, past and present* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu Natal Press, 2008), 88f.

¹³ "Report of the expedition sent by the Government to install Cetywayo as King of the Zulus", British Parliamentary Papers, C1137, p. 19. Cited after Per Hernæs, "Zulukongedømmet, norske misjonærer og britisk imperialism; 1845-79", in Jarle Simensen (ed): *Norsk misjon og afrikanske samfunn. Sør-Afrika ca 1850-1900* (Trondheim: Tapir, 1984), 104.

¹⁴ Guy, *Destruction*, xviii, 4.

warfare, King Cetshwayo was captured and sent into exile in Cape Town. Zululand was then annexed as a British colony, and in 1897 the region was included in the Natal colony. Following the annexation, Zulu territory was parted into several smaller provinces, and rapid redistribution of land ruined the Zulus' economic base.¹⁵

Written language came to Zululand with the Europeans, and the first to write down accounts on Zulu culture and religion were representatives of a literate, western culture. They were missionaries, governmental officials, travellers and traders, and shared a Christian background. Their comprehension of Zulu religion was naturally coloured by their presuppositions and was interpreted in the light of the Christian-European context they knew. As a consequence, the notion of a Zulu high god, *Nkulunkulu*, which resembles the Christian God, has been well established in the literature. This view has later been contested, and more recent articles have convincingly argued that the Zulus did not consider *Nkulunkulu* as a common deity.¹⁶ Instead, *Nkulunkulu* should be perceived as the original ancestor (the old, old one), thus the concept of a high -god was most likely introduced by the Europeans. The Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) missionary Johan Kjelvei, who spent forty-five years in South Africa, confirmed this understanding in a textbook for Norwegian readers "it is highly improbable that the Zulus ever have had a notion of a high -god".¹⁷

The understanding of *Nkulunkulu* as the original ancestor corresponds perfectly with the fundamental importance of ancestral spirits, the *amadlozi*, in Zulu society. There was a close relationship between the living and the dead, and the latter might appear just as real as the former. To emphasize the relationship and closeness between the deceased and its descendants, Axel-Ivar Berglund introduced the term shade, thus avoiding the term ancestor.¹⁸ The shades addressed their living descendants through dreams and manifested themselves in various manners: through omens and in visions, by also by taking the form of a snake. They were ever-present; they looked after everyday life and maintained balance in society: "An individual's interests were submerged in those of the community, and the fate of both was in the hands of ancestral spirits."¹⁹

¹⁵ Guy, *Destruction*, xix, 41; Stephen Taylor, *Shaka's children: a history of the Zulu people* (London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1995), 274.

¹⁶ Irving Hexham, "Lord of the sky – king of the earth: Zulu traditional religion and belief in the sky god", *Studies in Religion* 10/3 (Wilfrid Laurier University Press: Waterloo, 1981); Taylor, *Shaka's children*; Monteiro-Ferreira, "Reevaluating Zulu Religion".

¹⁷ "Om zuluene nogen gang har hatt nogen forestilling om en høieste guddom, er meget tvilsomt." Johan Kjelvei (ed), *Zulu: evangeliets landvinning* (Stavanger: Det norske misjonsselskaps tr., 1932), 29.

¹⁸ Axel-Ivar Berglund *Zulu thought-patterns and symbolism* (London: Hurst & Company, 1976), 30, 78.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Shaka's children*, 32.

The shades might challenge living relatives to become a diviner, an *isangoma*. The *isangoma*, usually a woman, was “the servant of the shades”.²⁰ *Izangomas* could make contact with the ancestral spirits, thereby getting the strength and ability to divine and to interpret dreams. Positions as mediators between shades and the living, they were advisors and able to recognise wrongdoers and to expose evil forces, the *amathakathi*. The *inyanga* (healer) was an herbalist, a traditional doctor, who made use of plants and animals for medical purposes. He used his skill to heal illness, but also to protect people, homes and animals from *amathakathi*.²¹

Zulu religion was not limited to individual allegiance. It was, like other oral religions, an integral part of the social system, capable of including and expressing present concerns. Thus, Zulu religion seems to be representative for traditional African religions, as characterised by John S. Mbiti:

Because traditional religion permeates all the departments of life, there is no formal distinction between the sacred and the secular, between the religious and non-religious, between the spiritual and material areas of life. [...] To be is to be religious in a religious universe.²²

The missionaries

During the latter half of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century, Norwegian society underwent profound changes. Up until the 1890s the majority of Norwegians were peasant farmers, leading traditional lives where possible social or geographical mobility was limited. By this time, however, a drift away from traditional life in the rural areas had already begun. Rapid population growth and agricultural improvements caused unemployment at the country side; people left their homes and sought work in the emerging urban centres or went abroad in pursuit of better living conditions elsewhere.²³ A modernisation of society took place, through which market economy and industry gradually replaced the self-sufficient farm life of the old society.

Corresponding with such economical and social changes, there were also important changes within political and cultural life. Parliamentary rule

²⁰ Berglund, *Zulu thought-patterns*, 136. I am indebted to Prince Bongani kaShelemba Zulu for information on sacred specialists in Zulu Society.

²¹ Berglund, *Zulu thought-patterns*, 309 f.

²² John S. Mbiti, *African religion and philosophy* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 2002), 2, 262.

²³ An estimated number of 750 000 Norwegians emigrated to the United States in the period 1835-1915. From only one European country, namely Ireland, did a larger part of the population emigrate to the United States.

was introduced in 1884, universal male suffrage was adopted in 1898, and by the approval of a new school law in 1889 all children were entitled to seven years of primary education.²⁴ Parallel to these more or less material alterations, a spiritual change took place as a Christian revival swept across Norway from the second half of the 19th century. The revival can be traced back to the end of the 18th century and by the end of the 19th century, this denomination had more or less obtained supremacy in Norway.

The revival was based upon pious Lutheran Christianity and took place within a low-church environment. The revivalists emphasized conversion as essential for Christian life. They questioned that baptism alone would secure salvation and underlined the need for each individual to go through a spiritual change. Passive adhesion to the church would not suffice; a proper religious conversion was required in order to be included into the community of believers.

Pious Christianity was characterised by stern demands on how to live one's life, and daily self-examination, prayers and Bible reading were fundamental virtues.²⁵ Acknowledging that humans are born in sin, the pious revivalism emphasised the risk of perdition and potential punishment in hell. The path to salvation was narrow, and certainty that the wrong step could be taken at any time, led to the identification of *adiaphora*. *Adiaphora* were acts that were not explicitly classified in the Bible as sinful, but which would, according to pious belief, probably lead to sin. The basic rules were well known: dancing and alcohol were banned, as were theatre and cinema. Sexuality was subject to strict regulations, one should be cautious when it came to laughter and jokes, and both clothes and hairstyle were expression of one's morals. The relation to other *adiaphora* was less clear, but the maxim was to avoid worldly pleasures that would take one's attention away from "a suffering Saviour, a Holy God, the moment of Death, or Judgement Day".²⁶

The religious ideology of the revivalists required that they worked for the inclusion of their fellow man into their community.²⁷ This was not always approved of by their surroundings, as the following account, written approximately 1920 by the theologian Carsten Hansteen, shows:

[W]e meet a selfconceit which sometimes gives the awakened a considerable feeling of authority with regard to situations and

²⁴ Jostein Nerbøvik, *Norsk historie 1860-1914. Eit bondesamfunn i oppbrot* (Oslo: Det norske samlaget, 1999); Tore Pryser, *Norsk historie 1814-1860. Frå standssamfunn mot klasesamfunn*. (Oslo: Det norske samlaget 1999).

²⁵ Bjørg Seland and Olaf Agedal, *Vekkelsesvind. Den norske vekkingskristendommen* (Oslo : Det norske samlaget, 2008), 15.

²⁶ Bjørg Seland, *Religion på det frie marked. Folkelig pietisme og bedehuskultur*. (Kristiansand: Høyskoleforlaget, 2006), 104 ff.

²⁷ Seland and Agedal, *Vekkelsesvind*, 13; Seland, *Religion på det frie marked*, 92, 120 and 159.

persons. This might lead to conflicts because the duty towards their neighbours [...] and surroundings cause clashes. While revivalists therefore sometimes are regarded as proud and pushing, it is the really Christian sense of responsibility that forces them to continue.²⁸

Equally important as home mission, was mission abroad. In the 1820s and 1830s pious laymen and – not least – lay woman, initiated the organisation of several local mission associations, and soon were several such associations scattered along the coast of south-western Norway in particular, but also in other parts of Norway. The NMS became a reality when sixty-five of these associations merged in 1842.²⁹ The Missionary School in Stavanger was established the following year, its purpose being to give young Christian men, who had a calling to become a missionary, a proper education free of charge.³⁰

When it comes to the missionaries' position within the religious landscape of the late 19th and early 20th century, we can assume, on the basis of our knowledge of their choice of education and of geographic and social background, that they were affected by the Christian revival.³¹ From 1879 to 1940, there were thirty-six ordained missionaries who worked for NMS in South Africa.³² The part of Norway that first and foremost was affected by

²⁸ Seland, *Religion på det frie marked*, 159.

²⁹ Einar Molland, *Norges kirkehistorie i det 19. århundre* (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1979), 146-162; Simensen, *Norsk misjon og afrikanske samfunn*, 12-17.

³⁰ NMS archive/Box 1952/Jacket 3/Søknader og eksamensoppgaver for V. Kull 1880-1886 for VI. Kull 1887-1892/jacket 3.

³¹ The following statistical information is based on source material from the the NMS archive, on an encyclopedia of Norwegian mission, Fridtjov Birkeli (ed), *Norsk misjonsleksikon*, vol. 1-3 (Stavanger: Nomi, 1965-1967), and two records from the MHS' website: NMS People and places > List by country > South Africa: http://www.mhs.no/arkiv/category_53.shtml. List of Norwegian Missionaries working for the Norwegian Missionary Society (NMS) in KwaZulu Natal, South Africa: http://www.mhs.no/artman2/uploads/1/List_NMS-missionaries_SouthAfrica.pdf. The statistics comprises only ordained pastors, not teachers, nor midwives or nurses.

NMS archive/box 1951/Jacket 1/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for IV. Kull, 1875-1879, NMS archive/box 1951/Jacket 2/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for IV. Kull, 1875-1879, NMS archive/box 1952/Jacket 4/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for VI. Kull, 1887-1892, NMS archive/box 1953/Jacket 2/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for VII. Kull, 1892-1896, NMS archive/box 1953/Jacket 3/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for VII. Kull, 1892-1896, NMS archive/box 1953/Jacket 4/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for VII. Kull, 1897-1902, NMS archive/box 1954/Jacket 1/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for IX. Kull, 1903-1908, NMS archive/box 1954/Jacket 2/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for IX. Kull, 1903-1908, NMS archive/box 1955/Jacket 1/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for X. Kull, 1909-1914, NMS archive/box 1958/Jacket 1/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for XII. Kull, 1915-1921, NMS archive/box 1961/Jacket 1/Søknader og eksamenspapirer for XIV. Kull, 1921-1927.

³² The period 1879 to 1940 are the relevant years for my ongoing PhD project. As part of the research project on Norwegian Mission carried out in Trondheim in the 1970s, Jarle

the revivals was the South-western coast, and the largest group of missionaries, a total of sixteen, were born in this area. The second largest group, when it comes to birth place, was the ones who were born in Africa, as sons of missionaries or Norwegian settlers.

The majority of the young men at the Mission School came from less privileged families. The largest share of pupils was sons of farmers. In their applications they regularly convey a rather modest upbringing, and it was not unusual to have experienced grave illness or to have lost a parent and/or siblings. Some of these peasant boys had worked as teachers, and one might be inclined to believe that this meant some sort of prosperity. In the 1800s it was hardly so. The teachers were often selected by the parish priest amongst his candidates for confirmation. The most promising candidate could exchange military service with the quite unprofitable work as a teacher in a village school.³³ Next to the group of missionaries with agricultural background were the sons of missionaries. As many as eight of the missionaries from 1879 to 1940 were born at an NMS mission station in South Africa or Madagascar. Many of them spoke fluently Zulu and they were more familiar with the mission field than their fathers had been. On the one hand, this might have brought them closer to the people they worked to convert, but on the other hand they gradually became part of a white middle class, with close relatives like brothers and cousins in different governmental positions.

Twenty-eight of the missionaries had their exam from NMS' own school in Stavanger. Two missionaries were ordained after being taught theology by the missionaries Peder A. Rødseth (1869-1945) and Ole O. Stavem (1841-1932) at Eshowe mission station in Zululand. The remaining six had obtained the academic degree cand. theol. (candidatus theologiae), either from the Faculty of theology at the University or from the private and more orthodox School of Theology. Despite alternative schools, the Mission School in Stavanger kept its position as the preferred place for future missionaries to receive their education. This can be explained by looking into the student's social background. It was considerably less costly to attend the Mission School than to go to University or to the School of Theology, as almost all expenses were covered.

A majority of the examined applications to become students at the Mission School included a reference to the applicant's conversion. Many date their awakening to adolescence to the age of 15-16, and several describe how

Simensen and Vidar Gynnild examined the social and religious background of the 106 men that were sent out as missionaries for NMS from 1845 to 1903. Jarle Simensen and Vidar Gynnild, "Norske misjonærer på 1800-tallet: Mentalitet, sosial profil og foreningsbakgrunn", in Simensen (ed), *Norsk misjon og afrikanske samfunn*, pp. 11-56.

³³ Berge Furre, "Sundagen var annleis. Preikesundagen som ritual og institusjon", in Svein Aage Christoffersen (ed), *Moralsk og moderne? Trekk av den kristne moraltradisjon i Norge fra 1814 til i dag*. (Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal, 1999), 59.

they fought long periods for their conversion. They were awakened, fell back to worldly sins, but were later on rescued again.³⁴ To certain applicants the awakening resulted from some crisis, the death of a family member or his own serious illness.³⁵ The applicants were mainly younger sons from humble homes, and admission to the Mission School usually meant a leap towards a higher social stratum. Taking their religious, social and geographical background into account, it seems reasonable to conclude that the missionaries were in fact “the theologian’s modest half brothers”, as the Norwegian author Alexander Kielland entitled them in 1890.³⁶

The dialogue between Zulus and missionaries

Christianity rests on individual allegiance, depending first and foremost upon the written word, on the Holy Scriptures. Christians are committed to one religion alone. Conversion to Christianity hardly permits compromise in terms of adjustment or adaption of one’s previous beliefs; an abandonment of the preceding religion is required. Thus, Christianity tends to be, in Bakhtinian terms, monological. Zulu religion was based on oral tradition, and due to the lack of holy books, oral religions relate to the present context. They are prone to be influenced and adjusted both by internal change and external ideas.³⁷ Such flexibility makes it relevant to speak of a dialogical religion, to use Bakhtin’s expression.

The contrast between the individualism of the missionaries’ faith and the collectivism of Zulu religion seemed fundamental. There was also a great difference between the holistic Zulu religion and mission Christianity, which, according to John S. Mbiti,

has come to mean for many Africans simply a set of rules to be observed, promises to be expected in the next world, rhythmless hymns to be sung, rituals followed and a few other outward things. It is a Christianity which is locked up six days a week, meeting only for hours on Sundays and perhaps once

³⁴ E.g. Nils Braatvedt (1847-1943) and Sven Eriksen (1854-1925). NMS archive/Box1951/Jacket 2; Killie Campbell archives/KCM 65241/Lawrence Titlestad, Under the Zulu Kings.

³⁵ E.g. Lars Berge (1851-1934) and Jon Tvedt (1871-1910). NMS archive/Box 1951/Jacket 1, NMS archive/Box 1953/Jacket 1.

³⁶ Alexander Kielland, “Misjonen (18.7.1890), in *Samlede verker*, vol 3 (Oslo: Gyldendal, 1999), 339.

³⁷ David Chidester, *Savage systems, colonialism and comparative religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, Virginia: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 38; Jack Goody, *The logic of writing and the organization of society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), xi, 10.

during the week. It is a Christianity which is active in a church building. The rest of the week is empty.³⁸

Such differences may explain why the Norwegian mission in Zululand was no immediate success in terms of converts. By the outbreak of the Anglo-Zulu war in 1879 the total number of Zulus who had been baptised by Norwegian missionaries was less than 300.³⁹ After the British annexation of Zululand, the situation changed: “The collapse of the independent Zulu nation created better outer working condition for the mission.”⁴⁰ The first decades of the 20th century were perceived as “a long great harvest” and by the outbreak of the World War, the NMS missionaries had baptised 20 000 Zulus, ten times as many as in 1900.⁴¹ A closer examination of the source material does however somewhat modify the missionaries’ achievements, but before turning to the sources, a brief recapitulation of Bakhtin’s dialogism is relevant.

According to Bakhtin, a close reading of texts will reveal their implicit dialogue, thus providing us with a possibility to read the missionaries’ texts in order to find “the other” – the Zulus. The dialogical approach can be applied on three levels: Firstly, dialogue can be recognised on a micro level, as existing within one utterance or even as a two-sided word. The debate between the missionaries in the 1850s about how one best could translate *God* into isiZulu or other South African languages proves this point. The missionaries had to take the African context and meanings into consideration in their pursuit of the most appropriate term for God.⁴² Secondly, on a mid-level, we find dialogue between distinct utterances, resembling lines in a play. The most evident dialogues on religious questions within the Norwegian source material are found in the minutes from congregation meetings. By the end of the 19th century the Norwegian missionaries accepted Zulu claims for regular meetings in their congregations, and protocols from these meetings are the most valuable source which – at least partly – is produced by the Zulus themselves. The minutes are zealously written down, partly as summaries, but foremost as lines, as utterances from the different delegates in dialogue, and through them we become acquainted with the opinions, worries and questions of identified Zulus and get a look into the thoughts of a Christian Zulu community. Thirdly, on a macro level, Bakhtin

³⁸ Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, 233.

³⁹ Olav Guttorm Myklebust, “Sør-Afrika”, in John Nome (ed) *Det Norske Misjonsselskap 1842-1942*, (Stavanger: Dreyer, 1949), 62

⁴⁰ Ibid., 89: “Zulufolkets sammenbrudd som selvstendig folk skapte [bedre] arbeidsvilkår for misjonsarbeidet i ytre forstand.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 132: “Tida siden 1900 har vært en eneste stor innhøstingstid for misjonen i Sør-Afrika.”

⁴² Chidester, *Savage systems*, 127-136.

places the human cultures, seeing human acts as potential texts. Back-sliding and church discipline are human acts that may give us information about the dialogue between Norwegian missionaries and Zulus.

To the Zulus, conversion was not only a matter of changed religious affiliation. It also involved some kind of adjustment to European ideals and dissociation from traditional culture. At the missionary conference in Durban in 1906, Gunerius Bovim confirmed this by stating that "We have not come here just to preach. Civilisation cannot be detached from Christianity and vice versa. When the natives have come so far as they are able to read an English newspaper, only then would there be any hope that they could acquire civilisation."⁴³ The missionaries' insistence that the Zulus should build square houses instead of the traditional circular ones may be interpreted as promoting civilisation.⁴⁴ The square houses should have windows and four rooms, where men and women, children and adults could sleep separately. A garden with planted trees was meant to surround the houses. The Zulus responded that the building of such solid houses was a question of ownership of land. As long as the land they lived on was not their own property, they had no possibility of taking on this kind of construction work.

In the ministerial books, the missionaries kept records of members in their congregation.⁴⁵ The names and dates of the baptised, of confirmations and marriages were listed, as were the names of congregants who were excluded from the church. The reasons for exclusions were diverse; the most common was probably what the missionaries tended to call indecent relationships, which included polygamy and sexual relations outside marriage. In a letter to NMS dated February 1880, Hans Christian Leisegang at Umpumulo mission station told about Paul, a Christian Zulu, whose death had left his wife and children helpless: "According to native law the widow and her children together with the cattle and other possessions become the property of his brother. Paul's brother is also a Christian and a married man. If they follow the Zulu custom two families will revert back to the heathen rule of polygamy." Thirty-five years later, Peter Blessing Dahle suggested a

⁴³ NMS archive, Minutes from Missionary Conference 1906: "Vi var ikke kommet for bare at prædike. Civilisationen kan aldrig løsriives fra kristendommen eller omvendt. Først når de indfødte kom saa langt, at de kunde læse en engelsk avis, vilde der ogsaa være haab om, at de kunde tilegne sig noget civilisation."

⁴⁴ NMS archive/box 105-3/Congregation meeting Mahlabatini, 14.7.1914 and NMS archive/box 104/Congregation meeting Umpumulo, 22.-24.7.1910.

⁴⁵ NMS archive/Box 102-104/Protocol Empangeni; NMS archive/Box 102-104/Protocol Umbonambi; NMS archive/box 105-2/Protocol Ongoye 1991-1940. The minutes from congregation meetings at Ongoye show that each congregation meeting began with the election of a notetaker, regularly a Zulu person. The handwriting in the protocol, however, is identical no matter who took the minutes. The explanation for this is probably that the initial minutes were considered a draft that the missionary later wrote out properly in the minute book. If so, even in the minutes from the Zulus' own meetings, the missionaries' presence is unmistakable.

loosening of the strict rules for polygamy. His opinion was that a widow, if she had no other option, should be allowed to live in a polygamous marriage with her husband's brother. Peter Andreas Strømme expressed the same opinion in 1921, arguing that the missionaries should accept this practice as long as the Christian Zulus themselves did not consider it a sin.⁴⁶ The home board was basically of a different opinion than Dahle and Strømme, but in 1924 the rules were slightly changed: Given certain circumstances, a woman in a polygamous marriage could be baptised.⁴⁷

Despite this evidence for a more lenient practice, "marriage to a polygamist" remained a frequent cause for exclusion.⁴⁸ The question of polygamy and church discipline is nevertheless an example of the continuous dialogue that took place between missionaries and Zulus. When the Norwegian missionaries came to South Africa, their opinion of polygamy was in accordance with their missionary instruction and the home board. Time passed, and the missionaries engaged in a dialogue with the Zulus, who responded by word, probably, and by action to the missionaries' utterances. The Christian Zulus took an active stance vis-à-vis the missionaries view on polygamy, thus contributing to the joint production of a new policy in this particular matter. Wallace G. Mills have discussed the question of church discipline in a Xhosa context during the second half of the 19th century, demonstrating how traditional customs were opposed by the missionaries. He concludes, however, that "[m]issionaries had always had to compromise, or, in some cases, to turn a blind eye".⁴⁹

The question of marriage between a Christian and a non-Christian seems to have been recurrent. The Norwegian public were advised by revivalists not only to avoid marriage, but also friendship with a person who had not been awakened.⁵⁰ It is no surprise then, that the missionaries excluded members of the congregations when they married a non-Christian. More unexpected was the open attitude of a handful of missionaries at a congregation meeting in 1914.⁵¹ This time, the missionaries demonstrates a more liberal, or maybe pragmatic, approach as they suggested that a Christian who married a non-Christian should be allowed to remain a member of the

⁴⁶ Hanna Mellemsether, *Misjonærer, settlersamfunn og afrikansk opposisjon. Striden om selvstendiggjøring i den norske Zulukirken, Sør-Afrika, ca 1920-1930*. (Trondheim: Historisk institutt NTNU, 2001), 139 f.

⁴⁷ *Polygami – Monogami: Med særlig henblikk på kirkens situasjon i Afrika. Komité nedsatt av det norske misjonsselskap og lærerrådet ved Misjonsskolen*, (Stavanger: MHS, 1982), 3.

⁴⁸ The ministerial book from Nhlazatshe. It is kept at the Nhlazatshe mission station. Photographed November 2008.

⁴⁹ Wallace G. Mills, "Missionaries, Xhosa Clergy and the suppression of traditional customs", in Henry Bredenkamp and Robert Ross (eds), *Mission and Christianity in South African history* (Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1995), 172.

⁵⁰ Seland, *Religion på det frie marked*, 117 and 180.

⁵¹ NMS archive/box 105-3/Congregation meeting Mahlabatini, 14.7.1914.

congregation. The suggestion was turned down by the congregants, who feared back-sliding and argued that their Christian history was too brief to cope with such a challenge.

There were several reasons for back-sliding. Due to difficulties in distinguishing social customs from religious activities, probably all mission stations had Christians who backslid because of their attraction to traditional activities. At the missionary conference at Ekombe in 1909, Strømme asked his colleagues about their opinion of “pagan customs” in their congregations.⁵² A frequent cause for exclusion was to receive treatment from an *isangoma*. At the missionary conference in 1911, Leisegang acknowledged that “while the pagan doctors may have good medications”, their profound moral influence over the people was problematic.⁵³ Instead of seeking help from *izangomas* and *izinyangas*, the Zulus were expected rely on European medicine.⁵⁴

Within the Norwegian Zulu congregation, beer drinking was another reason for being excluded. In Zulu society beer drinking was originally a ritual for tending relations with the shades, but it seems that the missionaries opposed beer drinking among the Zulus for the same reason as they opposed beer drinking in Norway: the principle of complete abstinence from alcohol.⁵⁵ While ministerial books from several mission stations prove that Norwegian missionaries regularly excluded congregation members because of drunkenness, Wallace Mills states that Xhosa Christians in most mission churches accepted the requirement to abstain from all kinds of alcoholic beverages.⁵⁶

Not all the Zulus who left the congregation were excluded by the missionaries. There are several examples where the Zulus themselves decided to leave, the usual explanation being their “return to paganism”. In the case of younger members of the congregations, their parents sometimes decided to bring them back home from the mission station.⁵⁷ No matter whose decision it was to leave the congregation, the Zulus were commonly readmitted to the Church. I take this as an indication of an ongoing dialogue and negotiation between traditional and Christian values and virtues. Dialogue between the missionaries and the Zulus, as it unfolds in minutes from congregation meetings and in questions of church discipline, shows that it was not easy to

⁵² NMS archive Minutes from Missionary conference 1909: “Hvilket standpunkt bør vi indta til de hedenske skikke, som følges i vore menigheder?”

⁵³ NMS archive Minutes from the Missionary Conference, Eshowe 13.-27.5.1911: “De hedenske læger har vel til dels gode mediciner, men den moralske indflydelse, som disse troldmænd har over folket, er stor.”

⁵⁴ NMS archive/Diary from Esinyamboti 19.1.1935.

⁵⁵ Berglund, *Zulu thought-patterns and symbolism*, 210-213.

⁵⁶ See for instance NMS archive/Box 102-104/Ministerial Book Empangeni; Wallace, *Missionaries, Xhosa Clergy*, 153.

⁵⁷ Kille Campbell archive/KCM 8362a/Karl Larsen Titlestad file 1/Diary of Karl Larsen Titlestad/17.2.1891.

become a Christian and to live a Christian life. By the beginning of the twentieth century, however, there seems to have been a gradual acceptance that the missionaries had to adjust to the demands of a growing Christian community.

Bakhtin stated that each utterance has an addressee and that the speaker formulates the utterance with the addressee and his/her future reactions in mind. The adjustments that seems to occur from the beginning of the 20th century, may be seen as an utterance from the missionaries, formulated with a changing situation for the Zulus in mind. Since the end of the 19th century, but particularly between 1909 and 1919, a separatist church movement rose in South Africa.⁵⁸ The black Africans wanted to be on equal terms with the whites when it came to religious leadership, and it seemed that the only solution was to establish a local, indigenous church.⁵⁹ The NMS missionaries found this development problematic. They feared that they would lose congregants to the indigenous churches, and in the 1920s their fear became reality when one of NMS' own evangelists, Petrus Lamula, broke out and challenged the missionaries' right to define what could be considered as proper Christianity.

Conclusion

Classic discourse analysis concentrates on power relations, assuming that social interaction is about the domination of or influence upon others' behaviour and thought. Within the framework of the classical thesis, the Zulus are reduced to objects for the missionaries' evangelisation. If we broaden our scope, and perceive the encounter between cultures as a dialogue, in accordance with Bakhtin's thoughts, we will see that the Zulus were acting subjects, and that they influenced the missionaries, just as the missionaries influenced them. Communication cannot be regarded as a connection between a subject and an object, but as two subjects in dialogue. The examples above, on the relation between Norwegian missionaries and Zulus, show that no matter how monological and inflexible the missionaries and their Christianity might appear, they could not avoid taking the Zulu response into consideration.

Knowledge of the profound differences between the Christian culture of the Norwegian missionaries and Zulu culture and religion contributes to explain the meagre results of the mission enterprise in Zululand. Until Zululand lost its independence, both missionaries and Zulus belonged to hegemonic cultures, and the Zulus had little interest in adjusting their culture

⁵⁸ The so-called Ethiopian Churches. Bengt G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 29; Taylor, *Shakas Children*, 292.

⁵⁹ David Chidester, *Religions of South Africa* (London: Routledge, 1992), xiii f.

according to missionaries' demands. Instead of asking why so few were converted, it seems more relevant to ask why anyone at all turned to Christianity.

In 1879, however, power relations changed:

Not only did the collapse of the independent Zulu nation create better outer working conditions for the mission. It also created an inner condition for a renewal of the people on the basis of the gospel. It weakened their willpower. It melted their defiance. Self-righteousness and idle boast was replaced by a gentler attitude.⁶⁰

During the decades following the Anglo-Zulu war, the number of converted Zulus increased. However, as Karl Titlestad pointed out, Christian life within the congregations was weak and fragile.⁶¹ The missionaries and the home board in Stavanger waited in vain for a revival to take place in Zululand, and the home board suggested that the reason was that the missionaries in South Africa had drawn far too little on Zulu culture.⁶² Had the Norwegian missionaries' approach been too monological, giving too little attention to the Zulus' response? Did they fail to engage in dialogue in the sense Bakhtin gives to this word? In this the Norwegians resembled other missionaries.

White Christians were at first inclined to resist the cultural translation of Christianity. [T]hey tended to cultivate their European religious traditions tenaciously in their new land [...]. They tended to remain highly conservative, until well into the twentieth century, in their tastes in church music and church architecture, as well as in their theology.⁶³

⁶⁰ Myklebust *Det norske misjonsselskaps historie*, 89.

⁶¹ Killie Campbell archive/KCM 8362a/Karl Larsen Titlestad file 1/Diary of Karl Larsen Titlestad/17.2.1891.

⁶² Mellemsether, *Misjonærer, settlersamfunn og afrikansk opposisjon*, 267.

⁶³ Richard Elphick, "Introduction. Christianity in South Africa", in Rickard Elphick and T.R.H. Davenport (eds), *Christianity in South Africa. A Political, Social and Cultural History* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1997), 12.

