

# Fantasies and Experiences

## The Norwegian Press Coverage of Africa 1900- 2002

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*We have some advantages – as a state outside the power blocks in international politics, with no colonial history and no tradition for hidden agendas.*

– Jonas Gahr Støre, Minister for Foreign Affairs, at the Oslo Military Society, 23 October 2006.

In the 19th century, and far into the 20th, Africa was out of reach of most Norwegians. The continent's image, created largely by texts – ranging from travelogues to newspapers – was often based on exaggerated, biased information. The African continent was constituted in the grey zones between fiction and reality, creating an ambiguous relationship between text and existence. This article argues that Norwegian newspapers contributed to these ambiguities through the transmission of colonial fantasies, rather than through the circulation of experience-based reporting.

Norwegian identity does not include a colonial past – excepting Norway's own experiences under Danish and Swedish rule from the 14th century, until independence in 1905. Consequently, there has been relatively little focus on a particular Norwegian-European colonial mindset. Historically, however, this self-image is only partly correct. Even if Norway, as an independent state, never had colonies, the Danish-Norwegian kingdom (1387-1814) had several – in India (Tharangambadi/Trankebar), West Africa (in Ghana) and the Caribbean (Saint Thomas, Saint John and Saint Croix). Furthermore, Norwegians served under other colonial empires on the African continent, e.g. in King Leopold's Congo and in the

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Belgian Congo.<sup>1</sup> Norwegians fought in the South African Boer war,<sup>2</sup> some had farms in Kenya<sup>3</sup> and Norwegian missionaries and traders established themselves all over the continent.<sup>4</sup> In short, several individual Norwegians, Norwegian families and businesses had colonial experiences in Africa. The press seldom represented these experiences, creating a void in Norwegian self-consciousness – a space that was filled by news and entertainment stories from other, mainly British, sources.

This aspect of Norwegian history has only recently become subject to public scrutiny and then only to a limited degree.<sup>5</sup> Generally, Norwegian public representations of Africa retain several myth-like characteristics, exaggerating certain features such as – war, suffering, underdevelopment, danger, disease, animals – while minimizing others including, – culture, history, diversity of customs, social and political processes. Many commentators describe the African continent more in terms of a country than those of a continent, in effect reducing the discursive space that allows for a differentiated understanding of change and social dynamics. One example can be located at the core of Norwegian journalism, in the news publication of the Norwegian Union of Journalists. In an article in the 2006 May edition of the magazine *Journalisten*, the new foreign correspondents appointed by Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) are presented by reference to the capitals they will be based in – with one exception. The Africa correspondent was not referred to as being stationed in a city, the magazine reported that he was headed for Africa,<sup>6</sup> whereas, he was, to be more accurately, situated in the Kenyan metropolis, Nairobi, in East Africa. When new correspondents were assigned in February 2010 the pattern was repeated. The Africa correspondent is again described as "going to Africa".

(<http://www.nrk.no/nyheter/kultur/1.6985031>)

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<sup>1</sup> See e.g. Peter Tygesen og Espen Wæhle, *Congospor – Norden i Congo – Congo i Norden*, Prosjektet Congospor, Stockholm, 2006 and Kirsten A. Kjerland and Anne K. Bang (eds), *Nordmenn i Afrika – Afrikanere i Norge*, Bergen: Vigmostad & Bjørke, 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Arne Gunnar Carlsson in Kjerland and Bang, *Nordmenn i Afrika – Afrikanere i Norge*, 107-17.

<sup>3</sup> Karen Blixen, *Den Afrikanske Farm*, Oslo: De norske bokklubbene, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> Some examples are Kirsti Blom, *Kitten*, Oslo: Oktober, 2003 and Øystein Rakkenes, *Himmelfolket – en norsk høvding i zululand*, Oslo: Cappelen, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Jarle Simensen, Internasjonalisering i historiefaget, *Tid og tanke*, no 13, Unipub, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> 'Fire nye NRK-korrespondenter er utnevnt. Tove Bjørngaas skal til Washington, Dag Bredvei til Afrika, Jarle Roheim Haåkonsen til Brussel og Berit Rekaa til Stockholm.' *Journalisten*, 24 May 2006.

## A Western Agenda

This genealogy of Norwegian press images of Africa is based, empirically upon the findings of two recent historical surveys – one about the Norwegian press coverage of foreign affairs and foreign related issues from 1880 – 1930 and the other about the coverage of the non-Western world from 1902 – 2002. These surveys are fully presented elsewhere,<sup>7</sup> but some general findings relevant to this article are set out below. The news media coverage of Africa is relatively small compared to other regions (although quantitatively better than that of Latin-America) and clearly it is marked by a Western agenda. Wars involving Western agents are covered extensively, whereas African politics are generally bypassed – with some exception from the 1960s and 70s. Most news entries were produced by international wire services and almost half of the material consists of ‘fillers’.<sup>8</sup> This is interesting because fillers, as Gunilla Byrman<sup>9</sup> demonstrates in her analysis, contain only a minimum of information. Fillers are usually excerpts from news agencies, with no by-line and little professional attribution. In short, they constitute ‘second class’ news, and generally confirm the reader’s presumptions rather than challenge them. Considering the Norwegian presence on the continent, as mentioned in the introduction above, the ‘Norwegian angle’ (that is, framing a story through a Norwegian individual or company) has been questionably unexploited until recently. The negligible numbers of Norwegian journalists who have travelled and worked in Africa can in part account for this.

Media images represent one of several sources to the everyday discourse about topical events and, to a lesser degree, social processes. They constitute a specific way of localising global phenomena and perspectives through a process of domestication;

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<sup>7</sup> Elisabeth Eide and Anne Hege Simonsen, *Verden skapes hjemmefra*, Oslo: Unipub, 2008 and Anne Hege Simonsen, Fortellinger om verden – utenlandsekningen i tre norske aviser 1880-1940, *Pressehistoriske skrifter*, no 6, 2006, 7–78.

<sup>8</sup> Eide and Simonsen, 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Gunilla Byrman, ‘Nyheter på undantag – notiser 1894 och 1994’ in Claes-Göran Holmberg and Jan Svensson (eds), *Medietexter och medietolkningar*, Stockholm: Bokförlaget Nya Doxa, 1995.

i.e., classifying countries and peoples in terms of evolution and development. In the following examples, from newspapers, we will see how some discursive traits have changed radically over the years, while others have remained more constant. The examples chosen are representative for the period in which they were written, and unless otherwise mentioned, this applies across the political (left-right) spectrum.

International coverage does not reproduce Norwegian foreign policy interests on a one-to-one scale in any context, and this is not exceptional. Interestingly, however, we find an unexpected degree of political consensus concerning international affairs in the Norwegian press. Disagreement usually emerged only in contexts touching upon domestic concerns.<sup>10</sup> The coverage of the Boer War (1899-1902) exemplifies this where pro-British, or pro-Boer, sympathies were interpreted as expressions of ‘Norwegian-ness’ and related to the ongoing struggle for independence from Sweden.<sup>11</sup> Another example of disagreement is found in the journalism of the politically polarized 1960s and 70s.

The surveys this article draws upon are limited in several ways. Firstly, they refer exclusively to the written press, this being the only media in existence in common throughout the entire research period. Also, the surveys did not focus exclusively on Africa, and consequently the years selected do not automatically include important historical events seen from an African perspective. The advantage of the approach taken in the survey is that it gives us a glimpse of an everyday newspaper coverage from the past to the present. In this way it is less tainted by the bias of hindsight.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Iver B. Neumann and Ståle Ulriksen, Norsk forsvars- og sikkerhetspolitikk in Torbjørn L. Knutsen, Gunnar M. Sørbo and Svein Gjerdåker (eds), Norges utenrikspolitikk, Cappelen akademiske, Valdres, 80 – 102, Roald Berg, *Norge på egenhånd 1905-1920*, Bind III Norsk utenrikspolitisk historie, Universitetsforlaget, Oslo, 1995, Simonsen, *Fortellinger om verden*, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> Arne Gunnar Carlsson, *Norske reaksjoner på boerkrigen 1899-1902*, Master thesis, University of Trondheim, 1978, Simonsen, *Fortellinger om verden*, 2006, Eide and Simonsen, *Verden skapes hjemmefra*, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> Articles were taken from 1902, 1919, 1928, 1935, 1947, 1953, 1967, 1976, 1982, 1991 and 2002. Altogether 7403 units are registered. For a full presentation, see Eide and Simonsen, *Verden skapes hjemmefra*, 2008.

## The Norwegian Context

Before we refer to the actual texts, we need to contextualise them socially and politically. Norway has no history of conquest since the Viking-period (with the possible exception of the attempt to annex parts of Greenland in the 1930s). The country lost its sovereignty to Denmark in 1387 and was governed from Copenhagen until 1814, when its rule was transferred to Sweden to cover Danish war debts. Growing national awareness led to a struggle for greater autonomy, and Norway gained independence from Sweden in 1905. This period was marked by conflict, but not by war. The Norwegian struggle for independence occurred in the heyday of European nationalism(s), which were connected to the parallel processes of colonialism and modernism. In Norway, concepts like ‘the nation’ and ‘Norwegian-ness’ transformed (partially) into biologically-determined categories in the 19th century,<sup>13</sup> and even if the content of these categories was highly debated, nobody doubted the validity of ‘the nation state’ as a natural defining concept for a historically given ‘people’.

The emerging press of the late 19th and early 20th century played a vital part in these processes by forging links between people who never laid eyes on one another – creating what Benedict Anderson has productively labelled in his book of that title, ‘imagined communities’.<sup>12</sup> The print media provided discursive spaces that contributed to shaping popular notions of the nation, its boundaries and the world in which it was located. Colonial imagery was, as demonstrated below, one of the construction materials. The establishment of a national identity is a continuous process, but as Kristin Skare Orgeret, for example, points out, in her study of nationhood and news in South Africa, ‘the invention of tradition’ is at its sharpest and most visible in transitional periods and in new nation states.<sup>13</sup> According to Iver B. Neumann’s research, political discourse in this period focused mainly on national and

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<sup>13</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Mening, materialitet, makt: En innføring i diskursanalyse*, Bergen: Fagbokforlaget, 2001

<sup>12</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London: Verso, 1983.

<sup>13</sup> Kristin Skare Orgeret, *Moments of Nationhood, The SABC News in English – The first decade of Democracy* Oslo, PhD thesis, University of Oslo, 2006, 27.

nationalist issues.<sup>14</sup> International questions were seen through nationalist lenses, and interpreted in light of Norwegian relations to Sweden and Denmark. Simultaneously, constructing Norway as an independent nation state was also a project with international (European) ambitions. As Neumann states, ‘Norwegian nation building implicate[d] a Europeanization of Norwegian politics’.<sup>15</sup>

In this nationalistic period the newspaper coverage contains a strong international perspective. In 1890, the foreign news entries constituted as much as 51% of total news and foreign news reporting remained at an average of some 40% until 1930.<sup>16</sup> International influences were ubiquitous within the newspaper itself. They appeared in news telegrams, reportage, analysis, editorials, and advertising. One explanation is that international wire services cost less than paying for domestic news,<sup>17</sup> but the fascination for foreign news was also motivated by interest in politics and business. In addition, international news was relevant to readers, who attempted to orient themselves within a changing world.

The press’s portrayal of the globe also served as a constitutive mirror for a nation state in the making, through confirming the national identity against the implied ‘otherness’ of the international world. In the 19th century, colonialism was not only a political reality, it was also considered part of the natural order of things. Although we find several examples of newspapers criticising cases of extensive violence, the colonial institution itself was rarely questioned. One significant exception is a commentary in *The Social Democrat*, 6 August 1928, criticising the colonial system at large. Africa is, however, not mentioned in the article. Another example is the daily *Dagbladet*’s 3 February 1919 comment on the genocide of the Herero people as not only terrible, but also as ‘mind blowingly stupid’, since it eradicated the colony’s strongly needed work force.<sup>18</sup> This is a particularly interesting

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<sup>14</sup> Iver B. Neumann, *Norge – en kritikk, Begrepsmakt i Europa-debatten*, Oslo: Pax, 2001.

<sup>15</sup> Neumann, *Norge – en kritikk*, 2001, 94.

<sup>16</sup> Simonsen, *Fortellinger om verden*, 2006.

<sup>17</sup> Henrik G Bastiansen and Hans Fredrik Dahl, *Norsk mediehistorie*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2003.

<sup>18</sup> *Dagbladet* 3 February 1919.

finding in the Norwegian context, where we could have expected some sympathy with other countries and peoples governed by external powers.

### **Fantasies as Entertainment**

‘Colonial fantasies’ is a concept that originates from Susanne Zantop’s study of how an already established colonial mindset preceded Germany’s relatively short and narrow colonial adventure.<sup>19</sup> According to Zantop, in her work *Colonial Fantasies*, German colonial imagery differs from the ‘great’ European colonial powers through its lack of actual experiences in the field. Germany was a latecomer to colonialism, in comparison with Great Britain, France and Portugal, and the German expansion on the African continent was relatively limited before it ended abruptly with Germany’s defeat in the First World War. Zantop studied novels, short stories, plays, pamphlets and scientific texts dating back to the 18th century, and found a rich imagery, of colonial conquest and submission, long before the German colonialism started. She claims that the German variant first established itself as a ‘mythological authority over the collective imagination’, whereas in Great Britain and France, it became, an ‘intellectual authority...over distant terrains’.<sup>20</sup> While this essay does not compare Norway to Germany, its interest lies in using a discussion of German colonial fantasies as one starting point for an examination of the Norwegian experience.

A newspaper’s contents cover a greater universe than news reporting alone and it is sometimes productive to review entries that are often considered too marginal to be included in empirical surveys. Entertainment is one such category; it has always been an important part of a newspaper’s repertoire, and serialized novels and short stories provided the diversion in the first survey period. Several international newspaper serials developed into full-fledged novels, and their writers, including Joseph Conrad and Charles Dickens, began their careers writing for the press. Such series, initially published for the British and French newspaper reader, were translated

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<sup>19</sup> Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies – Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870*, London: Duke University Press, 1997.

<sup>20</sup> Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies*, 1997, 7.

into Norwegian. This material was not only entertaining, but played an important discursive role for example in framing a white man's burden motive within a Norwegian perception of Africa.

During the Boer War, Norwegian newspapers printed British accounts and short stories from Southern Africa, paralleling the news coverage in interesting ways. Even if most Norwegian newspapers supported the small Boer nations in what was perceived as their fight for independence, novellas concerning black/white relations were read in a completely different context. One example is the short story 'White against Black' about 24 year old farmer Jad Hawthorne who is in love with his neighbour Miss Blanche Norton.<sup>21</sup> The romantic story provides the narrative's outer framework, but the story's subject matter concerns racial antagonism at Jad's farm. One evening Jad is told that some of his black workers, 'kaffers', are planning to steal some sheep. Jad tries to guard his herd, but is discovered by a 'drunk', 'hateful' 'native', who is described as 'half naked' and with a 'hot, stinking breath'. The 'native' tries to strangle Jad with his bare hands, but Miss Norton saves him when she suddenly appears on horseback. The couple outmanoeuvres another *kaffer* and the story ends happily.

This kind of narrative corresponds with Zantop's 'colonial fantasies'. In contrast with news stories, stories that entertain establish an emotional, mythological discourse that aligns with the more intellectual, political discourse. In the regular news items we hardly find any overt Orientalist<sup>22</sup> (or *Africanist*) descriptions of Africans as animal-like, child-like or/and brutal, even cannibalistic. In the entertainment material, such metaphors are common and these terrifying stories contain virtually all the elements of Orientalist *othering* possible. They establish oppositions like modern/primitive, rational/animal-like, intellect/instinct and reason/emotion and they join directly to the us/them dichotomy between black and white.

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<sup>21</sup> Norske Intelligenssedler, 10 January 1900.

<sup>22</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979.

This material shows how a symbolic, discursive conquest followed the military conquest of regions and peoples. In Norway, newspaper readers consumed such stories as entertainment and the papers themselves never addressed the inherent power relations of such distraction. To return to the example of the Boer war, we find that even if a few articles express some sympathy with ‘the suffering of the natives’, none argue for the territorial and political rights of the Zulu, Xhosa or Basuto. British fantasy images of Africa travelled alongside the news coverage, and made its imprint on Norwegian colonial discourse. In this way the press creates what Iver B. Neumann calls ‘conceptual power’<sup>23</sup> over a region with little opportunity for the subjugated ‘other’ to ‘talk back’ to the Norwegian audience. Such symbolic silence is, in itself, an important building block in the construction of a Norwegian worldview.

### **Fantasies and Modernity**

As pictorial magazines became more popular, short stories gradually featured less often in the news media. Colonial fantasies, however, were a common ingredient in short and often humorous articles about exotic places and peoples. Such articles were prevalent before the Second World War, but also were frequently published in the 1950s and 60s. An early and persistent theme of these stories was how Africa lagged behind the rest of the world. *Nordlys*, the most northern regional paper in Norway, provides an example in 1928 when they printed an article about a ‘negro tribe’ in Nigeria whose people refused to pay taxes. Finally, British officials sent a tax collector to the area by airplane. The text states, ‘the natives, who had never seen flying people before, were stupefied when the flying machine landed and disappeared in a hurry’.<sup>24</sup> But some moments later, the chief appears with the taxes, claiming that there was no point in resisting a government that was able to send ‘men from the sky’.

In this story Africans are portrayed as technologically immature, and therefore slightly childish and ridiculous. By contrast we find an enlightened, western ‘we’, seemingly British in origin, which tellingly includes a not-so-modernised Norway. In

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<sup>23</sup> Neumann, *Norge – en kritikk*, 2001.

<sup>24</sup> *Nordlys*, 7 August 1928.

1928, Norway was hardly at the forefront of modernity. This story also emphasizes how technological optimism and a firm belief in the future were linked to an evolutionary understanding of the history of man. Technology was established as a sign of (western) modernity, as well as, a sign of a superior position on the evolutionary ladder. By ascribing to the category ‘Norwegian’ as part of a general western experience, newspaper readers obtained modernity by proxy.

### **Experience Near – and Far**

As previously stated, Norwegian journalists rarely travelled on the African continent and, Norwegian first hand experiences of Africa were seldom recorded. When it happened, there are some significant differences between first and second hand reports. Journalists with no personal experience in Africa generally framed other Norwegians more stereotypically than reporters in the field did. We will start this section’s discussion by examining some second hand reportage.

The fact that a number of Norwegians served different colonial powers in various ways<sup>25</sup> was seldom discussed in the mainstream press, but sometimes we find traces of working lives. One example is from 1919, printed in the south western regional paper *Stavanger Aftenblad*. The story concerns Commander Olav Svihus, whose son served in the Belgian army from 1907, fought in the First World War, and later was decorated with the ‘Belgian King Leopold Order and War Cross for bravery’.<sup>26</sup> The main theme of the article is the father’s pride in his son. The harsh conditions in Belgian Congo and German East Africa are barely mentioned, and then only as a colonial backdrop that serves to emphasise the heroic nature of the brave son’s deeds.

Norwegian missionaries constitute another group that, through religious publications and books, popular meetings, campaigning and charity, have shaped the

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<sup>25</sup> P. Tygesen and E. Wæhle, *Congospor*, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 22 Mars 1919.

Norwegian image of Africa and Africans.<sup>27</sup> In the newspapers, however, mention of missionaries is scarce. When referred to at all, they are portrayed in print as hard working and honest people, living under rough conditions through their own altruistic choice. They rarely feature at the center of breaking news, with one interesting exception concerning the 1967 political unrest and uprisings in the Congo. The riots were directed against the Belgian presence in the country, but most of the Norwegian missionaries fled the country because of them. In this case, it is striking how the press portrayed the political conditions in Congo, as if the journalists knew the situation better than those living there did. Most missionaries maintained that they felt relatively safe, but the conservative national daily, *Aftenposten*, nevertheless adopted the words of the Belgian colonial power when stating that the Congolese ‘do not distinguish between white mercenaries and other Europeans’.

Some reporters appeared offended when the missionaries insisted on staying with the local population and did not flee until the last minute. For example, the populist daily, *VG*'s, commentator Scorpio concluded that the missionaries were unaware of their own situation. In his column, he claimed that the missionaries had caused Norwegian newspaper readers anxiety and grief because they had ‘led relatively happy lives with little knowledge of the dangerous times they were living in’.<sup>28</sup> In this example, the missionaries’ first-hand experience collided with the received image of Africa; and the media, significantly, chose the established construct over the political and social realities. The same phenomenon is apparent some twenty years later when *Stavanger Aftenblad* published a long report to honour the missionary, Synnøve Andersen, on her sixty-fifth birthday. Andersen had lived more than thirty years in Zaire and the article highlights her remark that she has led ‘a good life’ in Zaire. The journalist explains this apparent paradox by referring to the pleasures of acting virtuously and being useful.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> M. Gullestad, *Misjonbilder. Bidrag til norsk selvforståelse*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> *VG*, 31 August 1967.

<sup>29</sup> *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 18 September 1982.

In the main, the variety of Norwegian commercial interests on the continent was covered by fillers, until a significant change took place in the 1990s, following the internationalisation of Norwegian petroleum interests and a growing world-wide awareness of corporate social responsibility. One exception, related to corruption, occurs as early as 1976. The liberal daily, *Dagbladet*, interviewed the Norwegian business magnate Alf R. Bjercke about bribery and corrupt business dealings abroad, with reference to his experience from the African continent. Bjercke claims that bribery becomes more and more common the further south from Norway a person travels, but also states that Swedes and Danes are more prone to bribery than Norwegians. He concedes that he has never been involved in anything untoward but that he has ‘seen it happen’.<sup>30</sup> This is a rare example of a story in which the press questions Norwegian commercial behaviours. Nonetheless, the main focus of the conversation is that ‘everybody else’ behaves badly. The interview thus maintains the image of *us* (in the north) as superior to *them* (Africans and other people in the south); interestingly, Swedes and Danes included among the morally inferior.

### **First-Hand Experience**

The newspapers often framed travelling reporters as heroes or explorers, and sometimes put more weight on the experience of travelling (or returning) than on examining what reporters experienced in the field. When the writer Waldemar Brøgger left Norway to cover the Italian invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, his paper, *Tidens Tegn*, published no less than three articles about him leaving the country. Still, an interesting question is whether reporters with first-hand experiences of Africa put forward a more multifaceted image of Africa; in short, is their physical presence in Africa a way to counter myth and cultural bias? The answer is a qualified yes. *Stavanger Aftenblad*, a paper located in the midst of the Norwegian Bible belt, had an interesting voice in the Christian reporter, Johanne Margrethe Johnsen. She visited several of the main missionary grounds in Central Africa in the 1940s and 50s. In her writing Johnsen worried about godless dance customs and described Africans as

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<sup>30</sup> *Dagbladet*, 18 September 1976.

‘primitive people’ who needed compassion,<sup>31</sup> but she also – uncommonly – interviewed several ‘native priests’ and let African believers speak for themselves in her articles.

Another example is the artist and writer, Ridley Borchgrevink, who travelled to East Africa on a combined photographic/drawing safari in 1947. He wrote about his experiences in the social democratic daily *Arbeiderbladet*.<sup>32</sup> Contrary to both the entertainment and the general news entries, Borchgrevink’s writing is generally couched in positive language – the wildlife and people he meets excite him. He has his own personal ‘negro’ guide, a young man he appreciates and initially describes as ‘my teacher’. Nonetheless, even this text reveals several colonial perspectives typical of the 40s, in particular, an orthodox belief in European cultural supremacy. At one point Borchgrevink asks his guide which ethnic group he belongs to, and the man answers, ‘Masai’. Interestingly, Borchgrevink believes him to be Kikuyu instead. After only a couple of weeks in Kenya and Tanzania, Borchgrevink thinks he has better knowledge of local kinship relations than his ‘teacher’.

A third case demonstrates how experience sometimes tempers a journalist’s interpretations. The prolific reporter, Albert Henry Mohn, visited white farmers and brave rebels during the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya in 1953. His stories combined open-ended curiosity with political insight. They provide one of the few examples in the material where some African sources are treated as equal to other sources even if it can be argued that only the preferred sources – in this case a trade unionist and a rebel leader – are so privileged.

### **Moments of Change**

While the Norwegian discourse on Africa was shaped in the era of nationalism and colonialism, it would be unjust to claim that the same construct of Africa prevailed throughout the century. Some modifications of the dominant discourse occurred. One

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<sup>31</sup> *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 14 March 1953.

<sup>32</sup> *Arbeiderbladet*, 13 September 1947.

important example is the delegitimization of racial thinking as an outcome of the Second World War, another is the growing opposition to the colonial powers, which positioned the rights of Africans on the mainstream news media's agenda. Claims to statehood were, however, still understood within a nationalist and modernist paradigm, and paternalism remained strong for the duration of the period investigated.<sup>33</sup>

The consequences of these moments of change were nevertheless significant, both politically and intellectually. In the Norwegian press, this became particularly visible in the 1960 and '70s. In 1967, we find several examples of how notions about Africa and Africans as un-modern and primitive move from a 'natural' and unproblematized level to become topics for public debates. These connected, in part, to the divergent views on Norwegian development aid and to discussions about the best way to contribute to the modernization of Africa, as well as, to the growing awareness of the unjust Apartheid regime in South Africa. These debates were seldom presented as news, we find them in commentaries and within the culture section of the print media. Even Don Segundo, a columnist in *VG*, comments on problematic aspects of our understanding of Africa. 'We', he claims, believe that 'we alone possess the truth about man and the world, and that black people live in spiritual darkness, in wild superstition'.<sup>34</sup> Don Segundo denounces this 'disastrous arrogance' and 'blindness towards the psychological specifics of the negro'. He maintains that the overall intention behind development aid is assimilation: 'the negro only has one option for the future – to become like us, adopt our truths and our beliefs about man and the world'.

On the same day as Don Segundo writes the above, the renowned journalist and columnist Carl Fredrik Engelstad reports in the conservative *Aftenposten* from a literary seminar in Stockholm with African writers. In a long essay he analyses the Nordic understanding of 'intellectual Africans', but avoids naming a single African

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<sup>33</sup> See e.g. Knut Nustad, *Gavens makt*, Valdres, Pax, Valdres, 2003, Terje Tvedt, *Utviklingshjelp, utenrikspolitikk og makt. Den norske modellen*, Oslo: Gyldendal akademiske, 2003.

<sup>34</sup> *VG*, 14 February 1967.

writer. Despite this, Engelstad is impressed by the international flair of the African writers, and their ability to master English, not to mention French. By contrast he views Nordic writers as provincial and Scandinavian radicalism as ‘hysterical’ in comparison with the African ‘existential radicalism based on the bitter foundation of human realities’.<sup>35</sup> Whatever the African writers said in Stockholm is not accounted for, but Engelstad’s deliberations provide an interesting window to the orthodox perceptions of a Norwegian cultural commentator. These examples have several interesting aspects. They illustrate how former truths about race and evolution suddenly have become less uniform. Don Segundo’s critique of evolutionism implies that people can be equal even if they are different, while Engelstad indirectly states, that seemingly different people can resemble each other more than we think.

From the 1960s, the interest in the anti-apartheid struggle grew, and no other part of the African continent was covered as thoroughly as Southern Africa. The anti-apartheid struggle gradually became official Norwegian policy, and the debates about boycott as a political tool swung back and forth in the newspapers until the final fall of Apartheid in 1994. Exceptionally, Norwegian readers in the 1960s and ’70s learned and related to African state and opposition leaders by their first name, and the newspapers contributed detailed analysis and background material. In spite of the political violence that characterizes this period, the coverage in the 1960s and ’70s are clearly marked by *Afro-optimism*, in which postcolonial struggles were believed to be finally successful. In our material only two factors seem to challenge the Norwegian political consensus on these matters – firstly, the aforementioned boycott debate and secondly, whether or not black national movements should be perceived in racial terms. The boycott debate has been described elsewhere<sup>36</sup> but a brief examination of the second debate shows how the newspapers have difficulty understanding the South African conflict as being more complicated than a clear-cut black/white matter. Under the headline ‘Negroes against Negroes in Soweto: Cry of War in the Streets’, the newspaper tells about how (white) policemen are killing rebels in Soweto, while

<sup>35</sup> *Aftenposten*, 14 February 1967.

<sup>36</sup> See e.g. T. Linné Eriksen, *Sanksjoner, Sør-Afrika & Norge*, NUPI-notat, Oslo, 1982 and T. Linné Eriksen (ed), *Norway and national liberation i Southern Africa*, Almqvist & Wiksell, Uppsala og Stockholm, 2000.

‘blacks’ are violently attacking ‘other blacks’ during a strike ‘in the big, coloured township’.<sup>37</sup>

Even as late as in 1991 Norwegian newspapers were still confused about why skin colour is not enough to create a foundation for a political program. On February 4, 1991, *Aftenposten* salutes President Frederik W. De Klerk for proposing to abolish Apartheid laws. In its commentary, *Aftenposten* interprets the political fight in South Africa in purely black and white terms, stating that ‘both sides’ need to solve their problems to sustain the reforms.<sup>38</sup>

### **Afro-Pessimism Takes Over**

A last moment of change, in this overall analysis of newspaper reporting (from 1900-2002 inclusive), occurs in the 1980s when politics in Africa figures less and less in Norwegian newspapers. Development aid becomes the focus of Norwegian news on Africa, and after the fall of the Berlin Wall, only the apartheid regime in South Africa is still discussed in political terms. Most other African countries are covered in Norwegian news media, as a vast hunger and/or disaster area, commonly described as ‘Africa’. With the first Gulf War (1991), Africa disappears almost completely from Norwegian reportage. The exception to this continues to be humanitarian aid and hunger catastrophes. At one point, the information director in the Norwegian Petroleum Directorate even suggests that Norway should ‘adopt Africa’ – described in the *Stavanger Aftenblad* article, as a ‘sick and hungry continent’.<sup>39</sup>

An interesting contrast, however, is to be found from 2002, in newspaper travel sections. The emerging mass tourism to South Africa is treated as a novelty by several newspapers and the tourism reports are usually as unambiguously positive as the news reports are negative.<sup>40</sup> Interestingly, tourism in South Africa sometimes

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<sup>37</sup> VG, 26 August 1976.

<sup>38</sup> *Aftenposten*, 4 February 1991.

<sup>39</sup> *Stavanger Aftenblad*, 21 August 1991.

<sup>40</sup> For a more detailed analysis of tourism articles from Africa, see E. Eide and A. H. Simonsen, *Å se verden fra et annet sted – medier, norskhet og fremmedhet*, Oslo: Cappelen Akademiske, 2005, 168–192.

confuses the journalists. Mass tourism is connected with relaxation, consumerism and pleasure in a fictional country ('the South'). But for e.g. 'slum safari' in South African townships is geographically, socially and politically located in contemporary life and some reporters struggle with their own ethics: is a slum something that can be enjoyed? Sometimes the harsh social realities are too much to be fully digested. In an article from *Bergens Tidende*, the reporter describes the nature and the wildlife, the stars, food and wine, only casually mentioning a Mozambiquan refugee who was eaten by a lion.<sup>41</sup> To the journalist, the refugee never transcends the status of a victim in a scary fairytale around the bonfire to be positioned as fully human. While he is not called 'native', 'kaffer' or 'negro', he still appears to have more in common with the wildlife than with the vacationing journalist.

### **Covering Africa in the World of Nations**

Foreign news has played different discursive roles in different historical periods. Different newspapers have addressed different audiences. The material discussed in this article shows, however, that in spite of the moments of change mentioned above, the image of Africa in Norway changes glacially.<sup>42</sup> Even if colonialism is seldom discussed in and by newspapers, it is present between the lines as a 'natural' step on the path to civilisation for peoples who have not achieved the biological maturity allowing them to create a nation state of their own (as Norway has created its own nation state). From this position it is not surprising that African peoples and regions were perceived as appendages to European colonial powers and that Africans were considered to lack modernity and civilisation. Modernity, and the idea of the supremacy of the nation state, is embedded in the news industry, thus constituting one of the news industry's blind spots. When African leaders finally acquired a kind of political capital that was recognisable in the West including in Norway, it was during the struggle for national independence. This capital was lost when Afro-optimism

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<sup>41</sup> *Bergens Tidende*, 24 August 2002.

<sup>42</sup> It should be noted that the ongoing economic trends in recent years has not been registered in the surveys.

dwindled into Afro-pessimism and the debates about Africa were reduced to the size of the development aid budget and the impact of the structural adjustment programs.

The material suggests that colonial fantasies are most outspokenly present in entertainment entries (novels and short stories, news items with a humorous twist etc). The news articles are seldom as blatantly colonialist (nor as racist) as the entertainment entries. Still, since most of the material comes from wire services and newspapers originating in colonial metropolises, it is fair to say that the inherent power structures of news reporting are seldom problematized. In other words – facts seldom counter fantasies. Even if the first-hand reportage is more thorough than second hand, and gives more complex and on occasion, varied perspectives, such reportage remains scarce when compared to news and fillers. In addition, the reportage journalists are often represented as heroes or explorers by their newspapers, giving them a mythic aura.

Norwegian colonial experiences are present in the newspaper record studied, but the Norwegian soldiers, farmers, doctors and missionaries are represented as individuals with minimal collective importance. Probably because Norway never had colonies, colonial experiences never penetrated into the national awareness. The exceptions are the economic and development aid sectors, both largely presented as do-gooders within the modernist paradigm (even when they are not successful). Norwegian experiences do not seem to have had an impact on the overall press image of Africa. This may have led to stronger institutionalising of uniform colonial fantasies than necessary. There is no reason to believe that Norwegian soldiers or farmers were less affected by racial thinking than their contemporary British or French peers, but we can also find examples of Norwegians bonding and forming friendship with local communities. However, it is significant that when a missionary explicitly states that she has led a ‘good life’ in Congo for almost thirty years, her interviewer does not believe her.

Norwegian journalists have written their news within national frames, applying national logic. As mentioned before, Norway became independent at the peak of the European nationalism era and it is not surprising that the relation between modernity, nationalism and colonialism became formative in shaping a Norwegian worldview. This is a structural concern more than it is a moral or an ethical one. The world of nations also shaped the news media as institutions, and thus, as Orgeret points out, how journalists perceive the world.<sup>43</sup> The material also posits the question whether Norway, with its recent semi-colonial history, may have had a stronger need than others to consolidate its place in the civilized world through the symbolic conquest of others.

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<sup>43</sup> Orgeret, *Moments of Nationhood*, 2006, 28.