

# **Noble Savage and Ignoble Savage: Changing Perceptions in the Early British Period**

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The responses by travellers and missionaries to the black peoples they encountered on the colonial borders of the Cape during the first years of the British occupation reveal an important shift from positive notions about blacks to perceptions of savagery which justify imperial expansion. Generally, other races are seen in terms of stereotypes which are projections of the European travellers' preoccupations. This is perhaps not surprising, because on the colonial frontier the travellers and missionaries encountered new peoples and situations. In the absence of detailed information about these peoples, the Europeans were forced back on themselves in order to provide a framework that could make sense of their experiences. In so doing they often created a construct—the 'Other'—everything that the European is not. As Frantz Fanon points out, reality is seen in Manichean terms in which the self and the Other are radically sundered (Fanon 1968:41).

From a Jungian perspective, the ignoble savage can be perceived in terms of a European shadow self, for it is an Other that 'personifies everything that the subject refuses to acknowledge about himself ... for instance, inferior character traits and other incompatible tendencies' (Storr 1983:221). However, ideals can also be projected on to the Other (Whitmont 1969:165). This could explain the origin of the idea of the noble savage.

After the Khoi in Table Bay attacked Vasco da Gama's party in 1499, the predominant European view of these people was negative. Reports of the horrors suffered by Portuguese castaways further tarnished the image of southern Africa. It is not surprising that Luis de Camoens chose to present a negative portrait of the Cape in his epic *The Lusads* (1572). Adamastor, the guardian deity of the Cape, is presented as an ignoble savage. Stephen Gray comments on Adamastor:

he is menacing and inimical, and seen across a barrier ... his responses are essentially childish and they obey paternalistic directives; he is capable of love, but only carnally

... he is likely to foment rebellion, against those keep cheating him of his birthright, so that his strength of arm has to be encountered with superior ingenuity ... he represents heathen sin as well, still to be reclaimed by Christ (Gray 1979:27).

In short, Adamastor represents all that is dark and irrational, which has to be subjugated by the enlightened European spirit. This constituted the dominant stereotype of indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa for the next two hundred years.

After the Dutch, under the leadership of Jan van Riebeeck, established their station at the Cape, many European visitors arrived and commented on the Khoi. Perhaps the most influential narrative of exploration before the first British occupation of the Cape was that of François le Vaillant (travelled 1781-84)<sup>1</sup>. Immense ideological changes had occurred in Europe since van Riebeeck's time, which enabled le Vaillant—a student of the French enlightenment—to entertain Rousseauesque ideas of escaping from the confines of European civilisation to be free to encounter uncontaminated nature<sup>2</sup>. He specifically wanted to meet mankind in a natural state for, like Rousseau, he believed that civilisation corrupted man and 'in an uncivilized state man is naturally good' (le Vaillant 1796.II:124f). Of the Gonaqua people, whom he met on the western side of the Great Fish River he says:

I had here an opportunity of admiring a free and brave people, valuing nothing but independence: never obeying any impulse foreign to nature, and calculated to destroy their magnanimous, free and truly philanthropic nature (II.14).

The embodiment of all that is fine in the 'savage' is found in

his beloved Narina. With her he engages in a charming flirtation on the wooded banks of the Great Fish River. Le Vaillant's pastoral idyll is remarkable in southern African travel literature, as he frankly and sensitively portrays his love.

<sup>1</sup> In the Dutch period, the fullest narratives of exploration in southern Africa before le Vaillant travelled in the sub-continent are those of Peter Kolb (1719), Anders Sparrman (1775) and William Paterson (1789). In her examination of the writings of Kolb, Sparrman and Paterson, Marie Louise Pratt (1992:41-57) notes that Kolb, in his accounts of indigenous inhabitants, engages in dialogue which (like le Vaillant) gives a more benign dimension to his representations than do those of Sparrman and Paterson, who were influenced by 'Linnaeus' 1759 classification of humans' (Pratt 1992:45). Pratt argues that Sparrman and Paterson, unlike Kolb, saw the indigenous peoples of southern Africa as scientific abstractions, and, that seeing others as objects is a prelude to imperial domination. However, neither Kolb, nor Sparrman, nor Paterson presented indigenes as noble savages.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Knox-Shaw (1984) in 'The Explorer, and views of Creation', discusses le Vaillant as a disciple of Rousseau.

For le Vaillant, the Xhosa are also noble savages. However, he was aware of atrocities committed by both Dutch commandos and Xhosa warriors in the First Frontier War that had ended only a year before his travels on the eastern borders of the colony. In attempting to justify the nobility of his tribesmen he resorts to a trope which was to be adopted by numerous liberal-minded commentators that were concerned with the colonial frontiers. He complains that the Xhosa had been slandered by the Dutch border farmers in an attempt to justify their own rapacious actions to the colonial authorities. Colonial whites on the frontiers are seen as vicious, slothful and corrupt whereas blacks are innocent and preyed upon. Thus, if the Xhosa pillaged, burned farms and murdered some of the owners, it was only done in self-defence. Le Vaillant argues:

What I had learned confirmed me in my opinion that the Caffres in general are a harmless and peaceful people, but that having been continually oppressed, plundered and massacred by whites, they had found themselves reduced to the necessity of taking up arms in their own defence (le Vaillant I:316).

He is 'convinced that they were incapable of deceiving me, attempting my life, or robbing me of my effects' (II.24). However, the traveller has moments when he offers another construct of the Xhosa, which is illustrated by his reflections on the wreck of the *Grosvenor* off the Pondoland<sup>3</sup> coast:

I was told that ... an English vessel had been shipwrecked on the Coast, that being driven ashore, a part of the crew had fallen into the hands of the Caffres, who had put them all to death, except a few women, whom they had cruelly reserved [for their own use] (I.306).

Survivors of the wreck mention suffering abuse, but no-one was killed and no woman was raped<sup>4</sup>. Le Vaillant has given credence to an incident which portrays the Xhosa as viciously slaughtering helpless men and raping innocent women. His sympathy for the suffering victims involves him in a moment of conflict between his Rousseauesque ideals and his penchant for the exaggerations of eighteenth-century sentimentalism. In effect he dismisses the noble savage to pander to European fantasies about Adamastor.

Le Vaillant's contrary views arise from his perception of African and Africans as the Other. Where possible, he projected his ideals onto the non-European peoples of

<sup>3</sup> The people inhabiting the Pondoland coast were not, in a narrow definition, Xhosa, but Pondo. As a stranger in a strange land, le Vaillant understandably conflated the two very closely related peoples and presented to Europe a simplified icon of violence.

<sup>4</sup> Percival R. Kirby in his *True Story of the Wreck of the Grosvenor* (1960:131f).

southern Africa. However, in so doing he was interpreting Africans in terms of a Western ideology and making them serve the demands of that system of thought. But he hereby denies blacks their full humanity as they exist as ideological abstractions. This is why, it would appear, that, as demands change, icons of virtue can occasionally become figures of menace. Despite the contradictions in le Vaillant's depiction of the Xhosa, he nevertheless inaugurates a tendency of perceiving blacks (especially the Xhosa) on and beyond the colonial frontiers as noble savages. As in any trend there were exceptions, yet this perception of black peoples lasted well into the next century.

While le Vaillant's account of his journeys can be regarded as being in the confessional because he subjectively relates his experience, the next important writer about the frontier, John Barrow, writes in a scientific, objective style that attempts to eliminate his presence in the text. This is not surprising, as he is a scientist collecting information about a colony that had, in 1795, been acquired by Britain. Barrow's most striking encounters with the people of southern Africa occur during his first journey to and beyond the eastern frontier in 1797. Because of his scientific bent, he seldom depicts direct action or subjective interaction but, instead, as Marie Louise Pratt has pointed out, he offers his readers anthropological sketches:

The portrait of manners and customs is a normalizing discourse whose work it is to codify difference, to fix the Other in a timeless present where all 'his' actions are repetitions of 'his' normal habits .... He is a *sui generis* configuration, often only a list of features (Pratt 1985:127).

As a result of Barrow's scientific approach both blacks and whites are reduced to ethnographical specimens—abstract ideas, not subjects possessing their own individuality. For him, individuals exist only as anonymous members of groups which have essential and unchanging characteristics. If the ethnographical portrait is to be scientifically valuable it must be seen as objective, hence references to the subject are eliminated. The observer functions as a recording mechanism, a transmitter of information. This information, because it is objective and, hence 'true', can define the real nature of the Other. The Other becomes 'fixed' in a stable set of norms. This is specially important on the colonial frontier where the traveller encounters other peoples who have to be accommodated within a given system of thought, thus rendering that which is strange more comprehensible.

Although Barrow is severely critical of le Vaillant's sentimental approach to Africa, the scientist persists with the Frenchman's stereotypes. Thus, the frontier Boers are monsters of sin and sloth, whereas the Xhosa are 'fixed' as noble savages<sup>5</sup>. His most eloquent description of the tribesmen is:

<sup>5</sup> J.M. Coetzee in 'Idleness in South Africa' from *White Writing* (1988:29) comments mainly in relation to Boer 'sloth'. Concerning the Xhosa, Coetzee (1988:31) mentions how the Spartan simplicity of the Xhosa lifestyle and their consequent 'freedom from the more debilitating aspects of civilization' are ideals 'the British public school system would later try to reproduce'.

There is perhaps no nation on earth, taken collectively, that can produce so fine a race of men as the Kaffers: they are tall, stout, muscular, well made figures. They are exempt, indeed, from many of those causes that, in more civilized societies contribute to impede the growth of the body. Their diet is simple; their exercise of a salutary nature; their body is neither cramped nor encumbered by clothing; the air they breathe is pure; their rest is not disturbed by violent love, nor their minds ruffled by jealousy; they are free from the licentious appetites which frequently more proceed from a depraved imagination than a natural want: their frame is neither shaken nor enervated by the use of intoxicating liquors, which they are not acquainted with; they eat when hungry and sleep when nature demands (Barrow 1801:204f).

Barrow uses the generic portrait of the Xhosa in the above passage to argue that civilisation produces a way of life which impedes the growth of the body to its full potential, disturbs the mind and depraves the spirit; whereas if a man lives in accordance with nature, he fully develops his physical aspects, has a pure imagination and is balanced emotionally. Coming from a Britain undergoing an industrial revolution which caused hundreds of thousands to labour in abject poverty, live in slums, malnourished and pacified by huge quantities of penny-gin, it is not surprising that Barrow saw Xhosa life as idyllic<sup>6</sup>.

The plight of the working poor also generated a revivalist Evangelical movement, spear-headed by John Wesley (1703-1791). The Evangelicals not only attempted to minister to the needs of the poor in England, but they also sent missionaries to Africa. Thus, about the time that Barrow was encountering his Xhosa, missionaries were already arriving at the Cape. The Evangelicals were also partly responsible for the liberal movements in British politics which led to the abolition of the slave trade in 1807.

Thomas Pringle, one of the more remarkable writers of the early British period, was deeply stirred by the Christian revival and political liberalism. Numerous poems such as 'The Bushman', 'The Hottentot' and 'The Captive of Camalu' all stress the wrongs done to the indigenous population from a liberal Christian point of view. Pringle's major prose work is *Narrative of a Residence in South Africa* (published in 1835 as the second part of Pringle's writings about southern Africa, with the overall title, *African Sketches*). The *Narrative* can be divided into three sections. In the first, Pringle attempts to come to terms with his new environment as well as the frontier Boers. In the second, he is in Cape Town where he clashes with the governor, Lord Charles Somerset, about the freedom of the press. After this explosive altercation, Pringle no longer reins in his Christian and liberal sentiments and a polemical strain

<sup>6</sup> Barrow knew all about hard labour. His parents belonged to the rural poor and in order to gain an education he worked, as a clerk, in an iron-foundry in Liverpool (Lloyd 1970:16).

emerges in his writing. In the third section of his narrative, he returns to the frontier and is fully prepared to champion the Xhosa as noble savage oppressed by exploitative whites.

One of the expressions of Pringle's sense of the noble savage occurs in his journey from the frontier to Cape Town. His ideas of justice and humanity are outraged when, in a Beaufort gaol—a 'dismal' *cesspit* (Pringle 1835:168)—stood a Xhosa youth who

was truly a model of juvenile beauty ... and the mild, yet manly expression of his full black eyes; and ingenuous open brow, bespoke confidence and good will, at first sight (Pringle 1835:169f).

In the gaol, we are presented with a contrast between a vision of colonial oppression, attested to by the vile conditions prevailing, and an embodiment of the grace and innocence of the oppressed. Like Barrow, Pringle stresses physical perfection, candour and calmness of spirit. The trope is continued as Pringle subsequently argues that, while the youth did commit a crime, he was forced into it by the murderous attitudes and actions of the frontier Boers (120). Hence, as with Barrow, the Boers are really to blame for the situation.

In the last section of the Narrative, Pringle is similarly outraged by the British authorities' treatment of Macomo, the co-regent of the Xhosa nation. After outlining the sufferings of the innocent and noble Xhosa, he concludes with what could be called his credo:

Let us open our arms cordially to embrace [the black tribes of southern Africa] as MEN and BROTHERS. Let us enter upon a nobler career of conquest. Let us subdue savage Africa by JUSTICE and KINDNESS and the talisman of CHRISTIAN TRUTH. Let us thus go forth ... to extend the moral influence, and, if thought to be desirable, the territorial boundary also of our Colony, until it become an Empire (Pringle 1835:479).

There can be no doubt about the sincerity of Pringle's liberal Christian sentiments: he regards blacks both as men and brothers. However, the imperial rhetoric somewhat contradicts his noble vision, for imperial subjects are seldom the equal of their rulers. By projecting ideals of justice and Christian truth onto the Xhosa, he has made of them a talisman—a symbol—not actual people who may have their own ideas about life, belief and action.

Although Pringle's ideals continued to be promulgated by men such as Rev. Dr John Phillips during the 1830s, the tradition of the noble savage was a dying one (Fairchild 1928:363). Because slaves in the Empire had been freed in 1834, some of

the impetus in representing blacks and Khoi as wronged innocents was diminished. More importantly, the sufferings of British soldiers and settlers during the 1835 Frontier War helped in the eclipse of the tradition. It is difficult to expound one's opponents' nobility if one is at the receiving end of the assegai. Another factor contributing to the demise of the noble-savage stereotype was the Mfecane Wars that raged for approximately a decade on the Highveld as a result of the expansion of the Zulu empire and the depredations of people such as the Griquas, who possessed firearms<sup>7</sup>.

One of the best-known examples of Mfecane violence occurred in 1824, when Rev. John Moffat's mission at Kuruman was threatened by the Mantatees<sup>8</sup>, a people displaced by the Mfecane. He called on the Griqua to help him. The Griqua defeated the invaders, and after the battle Moffat reported that Bechuana (Tswana) tribesmen attacked Mantatee women and children:

When the enemy retreated, many of the females were left behind, who perceiving mercy was shown to them by the Griquas, ... called out 'I am a woman, I am a woman'! .... But this touching appeal had no effect on the hearts of the relentless savages (the Bechuana), who now rushed upon them .... butchering in cold blood, the helpless women and children, and hewing with their battle-axes, the heads from the bodies for the sake of some paltry ornament (Thompson [1827]1967.I; 1967:149).

From Moffat's accounts of the interior of the sub-continent, a picture emerges of a land plunged into endless violence, where life is nasty, brutish and short. This is scarcely a place of noble savages. The conclusion can easily be drawn that it is the task of the humane European to rescue the benighted African from his plight. Indeed, this provided a rationale for subsequent imperialistic policies<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The exact cause, even the existence, of the Mfecane has been debated (Etherington 1991:3-21); however, modern theorising is irrelevant concerning the impact Thompson's 1828 account of the battle (see next paragraph) must have had on his contemporary readership. Although this is a second-hand report, related to Thompson by Moffat, I have chosen it to represent something of the prevailing conditions in the interior of southern Africa because Moffat's own account was only published in 1842. Thus, Thompson's version of the battle would have had a prior impact on British stereotypes of indigenous peoples in the region.

<sup>8</sup> The Mantatees were named after their Queen Regent, MaNthatisi. They are more correctly named the Tlokwa, who were displaced from the north-eastern 'Orange Free State' (Bethlehem area) by the refugees from imperial Zulu expansion—if revisionist theories of the Mfecane will allow such an explanation.

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Brantlinger (1985:167) maintains that negative attitudes towards central and west Africans crystallised in the 1840s—a little later than in southern Africa.

Moffat's influence was great because in 1829 Mzilikazi, king of the Matabele, declared that all travellers had to proceed via Kuruman in their northward journeys<sup>10</sup>. One of the more important guests at Kuruman was William Cornwallis Harris, who hunted on the Highveld plateau during the mid-1830s. Because he was primarily interested in big game, his reports about people tend to be laconic; however, his descriptions of wasted villages and whitening bones are all the more powerful for their terseness<sup>11</sup>. Perhaps the most influential traveller to pass through Kuruman was David Livingstone, later Moffat's son-in-law. Livingstone's principal aim was to save Africans from the horrifying effects of the Arab slave trade. In his *Missionary Travels and Researches in Southern Africa* (1857), he argues that the introduction of Christianity would give Africans the moral strength to resist slavery; greater economic prosperity would undermine the practice and enable the people to be 'possessed of firearms'—which would discourage the attacks of slavers (Livingstone 1857:675). Prosperity would be achieved by 'encourag[ing] the Africans to cultivate for our markets' (675). Furthermore,

by the production of the raw materials for our manufactures, African and English interests will become more closely linked than heretofore, that both countries will eventually be benefited, and that the cause of freedom throughout the world will in some measure be promoted (vi).

His aims are somewhat similar to those of Pringle's 'credo', even if Livingstone lays greater stress on the Victorian notion of material progress. Like Pringle, too, he does not quite fully appreciate that Africa can only be a junior partner in co-operation; indeed, the exploited partner. However, unlike Pringle, Livingstone does not represent Africans as noble savages, but brutalised savages in need of redemption, as well as moral, material and cultural 'elevation' (673).

Yet, Livingstone does not portray blacks as viciously savage or actively ignoble; this representation emerges in the contemporary colonial novel about southern Africa, which did not have to be tied to facts in the same way as the travelogue. In *The Mission, or Scenes in Africa* (1845), by Captain Frederick Marryat, the hero, Alexander Wilmot, searches for an aunt lost during the wreck of the 'Grosvenor'; and, while some perceptions of blacks are favourable, Alexander's real thoughts about 'Caffres' emerge when he discovers his aunt had died: 'you don't know ... what a load has been

<sup>10</sup> Northcott (1961:145) deals with Moffat's relationship with the Matabele king.

<sup>11</sup> Harris (1838:298) mentions 'scientifically' examining the crania of fresh human remains. The impression that I have is that he was not heartless; he, like Moffat, had simply seen too many ravaged or decomposing corpses on the Highveld.



removed from my mind' because 'he [his great-uncle] has no grandchildren living the life of a heathen and knowing no God' (Marryat 1845.I:319). Obviously, living the life of a savage is worse than death itself. Accounts of black cruelty, derived from Moffat's description of the slaughter of the Mantatees, further endorse the idea of black savagery. The Xhosa are also guilty of atrocities for when the Mantatees flee eastward, they 'may be said to have been exterminated, for the Caffres (Xhosa) spared neither man, woman, or child .... their destruction was horrible' (II:71).

The stereotype of the savage, whose life was nasty and brutish, had by the 1860s and 70s become so entrenched that R.M. Ballantyne, author of *The Coral Island*, could, in his novel about southern Africa, *The Settler and the Savage* (1877), safely assume the endorsement of his metropolitan audience when he characterizes Hintza, the paramount chief of the Xhosa, as a man who 'possessed in a high degree all the vices of the savage—ingratitude, avarice, cunning and cruelty' (Ballantyne 1877:394). The novel is silent about any possible 'virtues' of the savage.

Forty years previously Pringle had vehemently defended the Xhosa; now they wear the mask of Adamastor, as do other black peoples of the sub-continent. The transformation of the indigenous peoples from noble savage to ignoble savage is completed.

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