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The Cultural Semiotics of African Encounters

Eighteenth-Century Images of the Other

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Published in:
Semiotica

DOI:
[10.1515/sem-2019-0030](https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0030)

2020

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Dunér, D. (2020). The Cultural Semiotics of African Encounters: Eighteenth-Century Images of the Other. *Semiotica*, 2020(232), 103-146. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2019-0030>

Total number of authors:
1

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The cultural semiotics of African encounters: Eighteenth-Century images of the Other

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Abstract: This a contribution to the cultural semiotics of African cultural encounters seen through the eyes of Swedish naturalists at the end of the eighteenth century. European travellers faced severe problems in understanding the alien African cultures they encountered; they even had difficulty understanding the other culture as a culture. They were not just other cultures that they could relate to, but often something completely different, belonging to the natural history of the human species. The Khoikhoi and other groups were believed by Europeans to be, from their perspective, the most distant culture. The Linnaean disciple Anders Sparman and others, however, tried to transcend this cultural gap, and used their cognitive resources, such as empathy and intersubjectivity, in order to understand the alien culture they encountered.

The aim of this paper is to unearth the cultural semiosis of African encounters and the intersubjective challenges that human interactions provoke. These encounters not only changed the view the travellers had of the Other, but also changed themselves and their self-perception. The encounter between the Ego and the Other is, however, not static, something predestined by the differences in their cultures, but dynamic, changing according to individual encounters and the actual intersubjective interplay that transform and change the perception of the Other. There are in particular four meaning-making processes and challenges within cultural encounters that are in focus: recognizing cultural complexity; invoking intersubjectivity; determining similarities and dissimilarities; and identifying the Other as a mirror of oneself.

The triad of cultures – Ego, Alter, and Alius – can be understood as gradual and changing aspects depending on the actual situation of the encounter and the personal perspectives, interpretations, and behaviour of the thinking subjects involved. Using concrete examples from Southern and Western Africa in the 1770s and 1780s, this study aims to explore this dynamic semiosis. One of the conclusions is that the relation between the Ego and the Alter/Alius is not something only predetermined by the cultures involved and their ideologies, but also depends on the individual thinking subjects and how they use their specific

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cognitive and semiotic resources, not least their intersubjective abilities, within specific temporal and spatial contexts.

Keywords: cognitive history, cultural encounters, cultural semiotics, history of abolition, history of Africa, history of exploration, Khoisan, Linnaean disciples, natural history

1 Introduction

The naturalists travelling through the rich biodiversity of Southern and Western Africa did not only encounter animal and plant species never described before; they also encountered African indigenous people and other ways of living. The following is a contribution to the cultural semiotics of African cultural encounters seen through the eyes of Swedish naturalists at the end of the eighteenth century. The European travellers faced severe problems in understanding the alien African cultures encountered; it was even difficult to understand the other culture as a culture. They were not just other cultures that they could relate to, but often something completely different, belonging to the natural history of the human species. The Khoikhoi and other groups were believed by Europeans to be, from their perspective, the most distant culture. The Linnaean disciple Anders Sparman and others, however, tried to transcend this cultural gap, and used their cognitive resources, such as empathy and intersubjectivity, in order to understand the alien culture they encountered.

The present study concerns the experiences of cultural encounters of some Swedish travellers who visited the Cape Province in South Africa and Île de Gorée off the coast of Senegal in the 1770s and 1780s. The disciples of the Swedish botanist and physician Carl Linnaeus, the naturalists Carl Peter Thunberg and Anders Sparman, along with the engineer and economist Carl Bernhard Wadström, and the lone traveller and adventurer Hendrik Jacob Wikar played an important role, not just for the advancement of scientific knowledge of the African fauna and flora; their travels also had an impact on European knowledge and perception of African culture. Thunberg, Sparman, and Wikar travelled extensively in the interior of the Cape Province in the 1770s and encountered a number of indigenous groups. Sparman and Wadström also travelled in West Africa in the 1780s and became important witnesses to the horrors of slavery on the French island of Gorée off present-day Dakar. Their testimonies paved the way for the abolition debate in the English parliament. Furthermore, Wadström, together with August Nordenskiöld and Adam Afzelius, drew up plans for a Utopian nation of emancipated slaves in Sierra Leone at the

turn of the century, based on the teachings of the Swedish natural philosopher and spirit-seer Emanuel Swedenborg (Dunér 2013).

Research on the history of travelling has focused in particular on the political, economic, and societal consequences of exploration, such as power relations, contacts, conflicts, cooperation, networks, careers, and not least how cultural encounters have led to political and economic change (Porter 1991; Pratt 1992; Pagden 1993; Elsner and Rubiés 1999; Bridges 2002; Abulafia 2008). But encounters with new worlds and foreign cultures have also led to cultural, cognitive and semiotic change (Dunér and Sonesson 2016; Dunér 2017). Cultural encounters have changed people's thinking, their categories and belief systems, have altered the ways in which they interpret the world, their own culture and that which is outside of it – and, not least, they have changed the travellers themselves and their Ego-culture.

1.1 Semiotics of cultural encounters

Cultural encounters challenge the ability to understand cultural complexity and meaning-making. Encounters with others also challenge the intersubjective and empathetic skills of the individuals involved, to see the Other as a human being like oneself, with perceptions, emotions, and thoughts. One looks for similarities and dissimilarities, and as such the Other functions as a mirror of oneself, displaying the nature of one's own culture. This article concerns these meaning-making processes in the cultural encounters of Europeans and Africans in the late eighteenth century, in a time of scientific progress, the spread of Enlightenment ideals, an expanding global market, and growing colonial powers. There are in particular four meaning-making processes and challenges within cultural encounters that are in focus: i) recognizing cultural complexity; ii) invoking intersubjectivity; iii) determining similarities and dissimilarities; and iv) identifying the Other as a mirror of oneself. Humans involved in cultural encounters struggle with these cognitive-semiotic challenges and, depending on how they handle these, their relation to the Other varies in inclusiveness and identification.

In order to understand foreign environments and other ways of living the human travellers use certain cognitive and semiotic resources (Dunér 2016, 2019). When interpreting the other culture, the travellers make use of concepts and experiences drawn from their own well-known culture, that are then imposed on the different, unfamiliar culture. The travellers project themselves on the unknown others, see the Other in a mirror image of themselves. The Ego-culture deforms texts from other cultures and times, the “alien-culture,” in line

with its own needs. The travellers draw boundaries between inside and outside, where their culture, being safe and harmoniously organized, contrasts with the outlying other culture, the dangerous, chaotic, challenging, and disordered culture (Lotman 1990). The cultural semiotics of the Tartu school, with Yuri Lotman, Boris Uspensky, and others, focused on the opposition of Culture to Non-culture, as order and disorder (Lotman et al. 1975). This binary opposition is a good initial approach to highlighting human boundary-work in the encounter with other humans. In the following, I will also discuss a triadic version of understanding this cultural semiosis, as well as the further transformative and transgressing processes involved.

What happens when cultures meet is that human cognitive abilities face difficult challenges in interpreting and understanding what the senses convey, in order to provide guidance for behaviour in specific situations. In cultural encounters there occur cultural-semiotic processes where the home culture, the Ego-culture, is transformed by the meeting with Alter and Alius, leading to a new self-understanding. In line with Anna Cabak Rédei (2007) and Göran Sonesson (2000, 2003, 2016) one could view the relations between humans in cultural encounters as triadic, an Ego-culture in the centre, while that which lies outside it forms the foreign culture, which can be of two types: the culture whose members one treats as different but equal, whom one can talk to and understand (Alter), and those that one treats as things, as something completely different (Alius). In the first case, which is symmetrical, the Ego recognizes that the Other is to himself another Ego. The other case is instead asymmetrical, where the Ego does not conceive the Other as having a potential self. Ego-Alter-Alius correspond to the first, second, and third persons of grammar, I, you, and they. A good example of the Alter/Alius typology is the different approaches of Christopher Columbus and Hernán Cortés (Dunér and Sonesson 2016). When Columbus came to the New World, he included the indigenous people in the list of resources, along with precious metals, animals, and plants. While Columbus conceived the native people of the Americas as Alius, Cortés's attitude was different. He instead employed interpreters and made use of Aztec myths in order to integrate himself into their world. He wanted to be identified with, or rather camouflage himself as, the divinity Quetzalcóatl, who according to the myth would return from the east, with beard and black clothes. To him they were Alter. But when he ordered the destruction of all the idols of Tenochtitlán, they were Alius. These shifting perspectives towards the Other largely depend on the actual communication situation, where it happens and to whom it is communicated.

In the following I will show the dynamic semiosis of cultural encounters, viewing the triadic cultures – Ego, Alter, and Alius – as gradual and changing

aspects depending on the actual situation of the encounter and the personal perspectives, interpretations and behaviour of the thinking subjects involved. The concrete cultural encounters are situated in a specific time, in a specific environment, and the behaviour, reactions, and interpretations of the thinking subjects change accordingly; they are not static, but change due to the interactions. The triadic cultural aspects are relational, changing, and even gradual and can be different from situation to situation. An Ego-culture could be another culture's Alius-culture, and vice versa. A person originally viewed as belonging to an Alius-culture can gradually turn into an Alter, perhaps even to become a member of the Ego-culture. The very same subject belonging to the Ego-culture can in one situation view the Other as Alius, but in another as Alter, perhaps even in specific situations view the Other as part of his own Ego-culture. With concrete examples from Southern and Western Africa in the 1770s and 1780s I will show this dynamic semiosis. One of the conclusions is that the relation between the Ego and the Alter/Alius is not something only predetermined by the cultures and their ideologies, but also depends on the thinking subjects involved and how they use their specific cognitive and semiotic resources, not least their intersubjective abilities, in specific temporal and spatial contexts.

2 Alius

In the meeting with foreign cultures, the traveller faces difficulties in understanding the complexity, recognizing the differences between the different cultures and ethnic groups. Commonly this is manifested as a “dehumanization” of the Other, or the failure to recognize the complexity of cultures and instead label them as “primitive” cultures. This reaction is often interpreted as an instance of intentional economic and political power ambitions. But this is not the whole truth. These encounters depend essentially on the cognitive and semiotic challenges human thought faces concerning empathy, intersubjectivity, and coordination of the inner worlds.

The traveller when encountering new people and cultures needs to handle the immense bulk of new impressions by sorting them, categorizing them, gathering them in groups, searching for general or essential qualities that help him or her to characterize the group-specific qualities. These cognitive processes of categorization or typification give rise to the stereotypes of “national character” of the exotic other that pervade much of travel literature, as well as in general in human everyday interactions with other people. The African as happy and skilled in arts and crafts is a common stereotype in eighteenth-century

travel literature (for example in Wadström), but we also find other, as we will see, more gruesome stereotypes. Stereotyping is to some extent a result of cognitive thriftiness. It is cognitively demanding to see every item, every individual as unique. Instead the brain searches for patterns, generalizations, and prototypes. As Sonesson (1995: 14) puts it, stereotypes are “bad typifications: they are abusive generalisations which are not corrected for the individual case before being applied to it.” The traveller therefore often ignores or has difficulty seeing the individual characteristics or personalities of the humans encountered.

Another common cognitive strategy to sort the experience is to conceive humans as ordered in hierarchies, in eighteenth-century society as well as in our present time, based on economic, social, cultural, or ancestral relations. Within the Linnaean classification of nature there is a hierarchy of creation, a chain of being, a ladder from the primitive to the most advanced, including a hierarchical classification of the human races. Linnaean classification is a natural-historical expression of such a hierarchical thinking that is both a product of human cultural history and human cognition. Not surprisingly, the notion of the superiority of the European was prevalent in much of European thought in the eighteenth century.

2.1 The Ultimate Alius

A way of interpreting the European view of the African is as an instance of an Ego-Alius relation. The African has become an extreme example of the “Ultimate Alius.” Two common topoi are the “Hottentot” and the “Negro Slave,” which illustrate two kinds of Ultimate Alius: one based on perceptual alienation, that the Other is different due to its mere physical looks. The second kind of Ultimate Alius is a hierarchic alienation: the Other is different due to its hierarchical relation to the Ego.

In the anthropological literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Khoikhoi have commonly been the “ideal” example of the Ultimate Alius, the furthest extreme from the white European, very close to the non-human brutes. Common in the alienation of the Ultimate Alius is an exaggerated focus on visual or other perceptual differences, often due to limited experience of the Other and its diversity, whether it is skin colour, hair quality, or other distinguishing visual marks in contrast to the physiognomy of the Ego.

The physiognomy of the Khoikhoi women came especially in focus. The “Hottentot apron” became a mark of the Ultimate Alius, the extended labia minora that were reported to be common among Khoikhoi women (Gilman 1985; Fausto-Sterling 1995; Lindfors 1996). The French explorer François Levallant

depicted in his published travel journals (1790) from the Cape Province and Namaqualand in the 1780s a Khoikhoi woman with a flap of skin covering the vaginal area (Figure 1). Another alienating example of the Ultimate Alius is the “Hottentot Venus,” a Khoikhoi woman by the name Saartjie Baartman, who



Figure 1: A Khoikhoi woman, in François Levaillant, *Voyage de Monsieur Le Vaillant dans l'intérieur de l'Afrique* (1790).

according to European, certainly male, viewers had peculiarly protruding buttocks and a large vulva (Magubane 2001; Holmes 2007; Crais and Scully 2009). Saartjie was born in 1789 near the Great Fish (Gamtoos) River in Eastern Cape. She belonged to the clan of Griqua people, but migrated to Cape Town where she worked as a servant for a Boer farmer. However, William Dunlop, a British ship's doctor, noticed her large rump and genitalia. The poor Saartjie became a celebrity. She spent four years in London on display for "scientific" purposes, and even as an extraordinary "freak-show" exhibit (Qureshi 2004). A caricature shows how the astonished viewers exclaim "Oh! God Damn what roast beef!" and "Ah! how comical is nature" (Figure 2). The French print equally mocks the nosey Britons (here depicted with Scottish kilts) and the extraordinary physiognomy of "La belle Hottentote." Both are targets for French cultural derision. When Saartjie finally died, the French professor of comparative anatomy Georges Cuvier acquired her cadaver. Her body was copied in a plaster-cast and then dissected. The full cast of her body was on exhibition until the 1970s at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. She was finally repatriated and buried in 2002.



Figure 2: Saartjie Baartman. "Les Curieux en extase ou les Cordons de souliers," French print from 1815.

Besides the obvious gender-aspect of this eroticizing of the exotic woman exposed to the male gaze, the perceptual Ultimate Alius depending on a physical difference has its origin in ignorance and lack of experience of other human appearances. People in Europe had very limited experience of other human physiognomies. Recurrent exposure to African people makes this view less intrusive. The second kind of Ultimate Alius is however more insidious, when the alienation rests on human hierarchies.

In the picture of the British slave ship, the *Brookes*, the African slaves are rendered as the Ultimate Alius (Figure 3). The diagrammatic drawing shows slaves on a ship seen from an aerial perspective and the ship in cross-section in the style of naval architecture drawings. The captured and enslaved Africans are shown as commodities. In a logistic packing of the goods in the enclosed loading area the slaves are shipped to the consumer market in the Americas. With precise measurements of a methodical bureaucratic administration the stowing becomes a mathematical problem, a packing and enumeration of human bodies. The *Brookes* was allowed to store 454 slaves, with a maximum space for each body of 1.78×0.41 metres, but reportedly carried up to 740 enslaved Africans. The bodies in black ink are nearly identical, depersonalized, laid in straight rows with minimal free space between them. The Other becomes a thing, non-human, an Ultimate Alius.

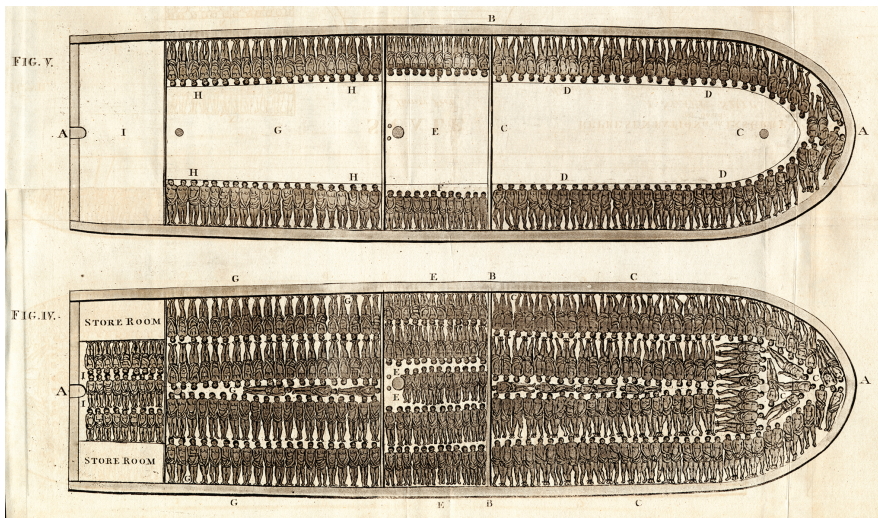


Figure 3: Brookes slave ship, in Carl Bernhard Wadström, *An Essay on Colonization* (1794–1795). Photo: Lund University Library.

The picture of the *Brookes* slave ship became politically influential in the abolition movement at the end of eighteenth century (Wood 2000). The Committee for the Abolition of Slavery used and distributed this visual rendering in order to show the cynical horrors of slavery. The engraving was first published in 1789. Wadström got hold of the plates and used them for his *An Essay on Colonization*, published in 1794–1795, including a detailed description of the ship. The entire system of the slave trade rested, according to the abolitionist William Wilberforce, on the idea of African inferiority as “the moral and intellectual bulwark.” To pro-slavery spokesmen the slave was an *Alius*. Africans and Europeans did not share a “common nature” (Baker 1970; Ahlskog 2010). In the case of the slave the Ultimate *Alius* is not just something utterly different due to visual appearance, race, colour, or cultural artefacts, but depending on the hierarchic relation between the master and the subordinate, merchant and goods. The alienation of the Ultimate *Alius*, making an *Alter* with a self into an *Alius* of commodity worked as a self-deceptive instrument for justifying the treatment of other beings for one’s own benefits.

2.2 Ego becomes *Alius*: The European as *Alius*

The vast majority of travel diaries from the eighteenth century appoint their own European culture as the *Ego* and the visited culture as the *Other*. In some rare cases (due to the dearth of written sources) one finds the opposite perspective – a non-European culture is the *Ego* and the European culture the *Other*. The *Ego* becomes *Alius*. The Swedish nineteenth-century traveller and naturalist Charles John Andersson, in *The Okavango River* (1861b), depicts an occasion during a rhinoceros hunt when he is treated as *Alius* in the eyes of the *Ovaquangari* people of the Okavango. “The white man a show” (Figure 4), as a monstrosity, something alien. The inhabitants came from near and far to see the strange white man. Andersson writes: “twenty or thirty people might be seen issuing from a single homestead to have a stare at me. The whole scene reminded me of visitors to a menagerie stopping outside some wild beast’s den curiously to examine the monster.” But directly after he comments on the looks of the women with “bull-dog lips, and broad, flat faces” and “crisp woolly hair,” that could be considered as “good models for the *Furies*” (Andersson 1861b: 229–230). Charles John Andersson spent nearly two decades in Southwest Africa. His view of the African fluctuated from *Alius* to *Alter*, sometimes as something utterly different, as *Alius*, but perhaps more commonly as

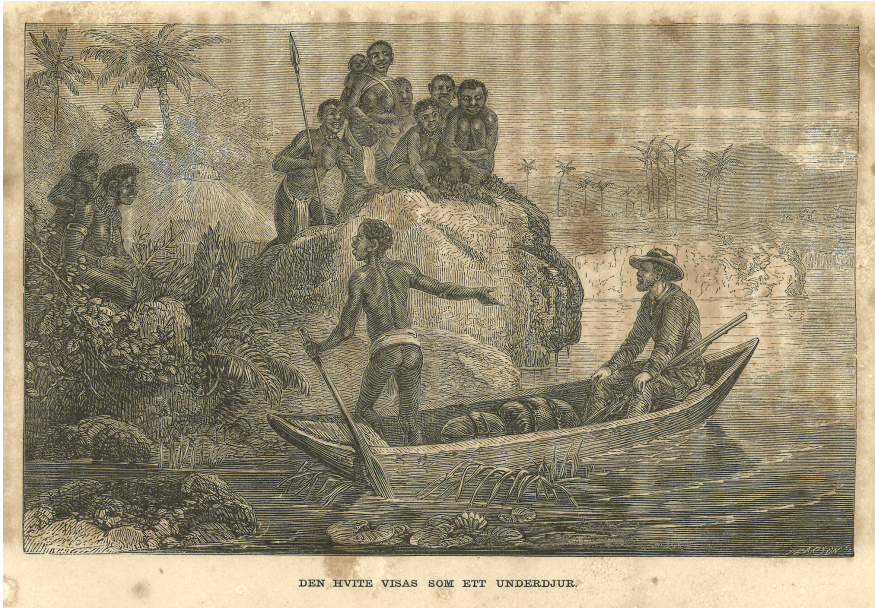


Figure 4: “The white man is shown as a wonder beast,” in Charles John Andersson, *Floden Okavango* (1861a).

an Alter, someone to be on speaking terms with, whom he could talk to, collaborate with, and engage with in joint ventures. He took part in the Herero-Nama War and was appointed Supreme Chief of the Damara people in 1864, which could be almost comprehended as a fusion of Ego and Alius, as he would have become a member of the Ego-culture of the Alius.

The relation between Ego and Alius depends on the perspective: the Ego is Alius in the eyes of the Other, and the Alius is Ego from the point of view of the Other. The European traveller is Ego and Alius, just as the African is Ego and Alius depending on the situation and perspective. Obviously, for colonial, political, economic, and cultural reasons, the situation is not fully symmetrical. The European is the visitor, the intruder – in the case of Andersson, he was a hunter, tradesman, and superintendent of the Walvis Bay Mining Company – while the African stays as the domestic inhabitant of a land that has belonged to his people for many generations. My point here is not to ignore this asymmetry, but rather to point at the perspectival relational situation, where not only the European traveller counts as an Ego, but also the

African in his/her own right is an Ego, an agent of perspectives and attitudes towards Alter and Alius.

The asymmetrical situation becomes more obvious owing to the lack of written sources from the eighteenth century where the African as Ego views the European as Alius. However, colonial rock art from Southern Africa gives a glimpse of the inversed Ego-Alius situation. Rock carvings and paintings from the colonial era occasionally depict European ships with masts and sails, horse and oxen carriages, and European women in bulky crinolines (Figure 5), all signifying alien European material culture (Townley Johnson et al. 1959; Hall and Mazel 2005). The detailed picture of a seventeenth-century ship from Porterville, Western Cape, suggests that the artist was familiar with European ships, but perhaps less conversant with their sailing technology (Figure 6). The flag on the mizzenmast to the far right flies in the opposite direction to the other three. The Europeans and their material culture were something recognizable, but alien to the African Ego-culture.



Figure 5: A European woman in long skirt and sunbonnet. San rock art from Katbakkies, Koue Bokkeveld, Cape. From Johnson et al. 1959.



Figure 6: Porterville Galleon. San rock art depicting a Dutch seventeenth-century sailing ship. Porterville, Western Cape.

2.3 Alter becomes Alius: Khoisan as Alius

The case of the Alius is, to a great extent, a question of ignorance, and lack of knowledge and experience of the Other. Someone that in principle could be an Alter is instead seen as an Alius. This latter perspective could, obviously in a colonial setting, have political and economic motives, but also, in a more profound sense, cognitive-semiotic grounds. Knowledge about the people of South Africa was very limited from a European point of view, particularly so for Swedish subjects and travellers. The seaman Nils Matsson Kiöping's description published in 1667 of his travels in Dutch service through Asia, Africa, and "many other heathen countries," includes the first notes about the Cape Province in Swedish. In 1705 Professor Harald Vallerius at the University of Uppsala presided over a dissertation in geography, *Caput Bonæ Spei*, about the Cape of Good Hope based on secondary written sources. The first Swedes travelling in South Africa (Winquist 1978) were employees of the Dutch East India Company, Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC). One of the first Swedish residents in the Cape, Olof Bergh, was a VOC official, sergeant, ensign, and lieutenant. He came to the Cape in 1676 and stayed there until his death in 1724. He was an explorer and led expeditions to Namaqualand in 1682 and 1683, following the instructions of the first Governor of the Cape Colony, Simon van der Stel (Bergh 2010). Olof Bergh married Anna de Koningh, born in Batavia (now Jakarta), who was daughter of the slave Angela of Bengal. Even though Anna was born in captivity, 27 slaves worked at their farm, Groot Constantia, south of Cape Town.

The establishment of the Swedish East India Company (SOC) in 1731 brought new opportunities for Swedish-African encounters. On the six-month journey to Canton (Guangzhou) in China, Cape Town became one of the major stops for resupply. Jacob Wallenberg, priest on the company's ship *Finland*, visited Cape Town in 1770. He complained that the town lacked an opera, coffeehouses, billiards, clubs ... a really boring place. Questioning the morality of the European colonists and their sexual exploitation of black slave women, he remarks that the Englishmen sometimes take themselves "a dear black sweetheart," and the Frenchman turns around "aux pieds de sa belle dame," something that his simple countrymen usually viewed as an act of zoophilia. And he asked: "Which do you find darkest, her skin or their action?" (Wallenberg 1999 [1781]: 110). However, from the 1770s we find the two hitherto most detailed descriptions of Southern Africa by the Linnaean disciples, Thunberg and Sparrman. To these two one could add Wikar, who worked for VOC. These three, who stayed in Southern Africa at the same time and travelled in the same area, nevertheless show very different approaches towards the Other. Depending on the situation and their personal approaches and interpretations of the Other, they understood the Other in quite distinctive and different ways. The European attitude towards the Other is in a cultural-semiotic understanding by no means hegemonic, static, and universal to all European travellers.

The first of them, Carl Peter Thunberg, physician and naturalist, who had studied under Linnaeus in Uppsala, travelled extensively in South Africa during the years 1772–1775 (Skuncke 2014). He made three expeditions into the interior and along the coastal region of Western Cape. He travelled with the superintendent Johan Andreas Auge of the VOC garden in Cape Town to Saldanha Bay, Breede Valley, Langkloof, Gamtoos River, and Little Karoo. He made two journeys together with the Scottish gardener Francis Masson, including one with the Dutch explorer Robert Jacob Gordon. His travel experiences were published in *Resa uti Europa, Africa, Asia, förrättad åren 1770–1779* (1793 [1788–1793]). Later as professor of botany in Uppsala he also published, between 1807 and 1823, numerous editions of a *Flora Capensis*. In the preface of that book he explained his endeavour to study the riches of the Cape flora: "With this object I undertook several journeys, often fraught with hardships and dangers. [...] I met the dangers of life; I prudently eluded ferocious tribes and beasts, and for the sake of discovering the beautiful plants of this southern Thule, I joyfully ran, sweated and chilled." (Thunberg 1807: preface; Broberg 2016: 19).

In comparison to Sparrman, Thunberg mentions his indigenous servants less often. Thunberg's text appears more "scientific" and soulless, "objective," more with a focus on the careful description of the Cape flora. Thunberg's social geography of the Cape is to a great extent made up of settlers and their farms,

which he carefully names. As William Beinart (1998: 781) remarks, “Although he devoted little space to Khoikhoi people as individuals, he did make an attempt to get beyond a descriptive ethnographic record by reconstructing the location of the Khoikhoi polities before colonisation.” Thus, he recognizes that the land he travels through was not “unpossessed,” but once belonged to the Khoikhoi. As a schooled Linnaean naturalist, he makes ethnographical observations, records Khoikhoi word lists, etc.

The aim of Thunberg’s travels to the interior was to collect new species of plants and make new observations of animals not known to the learned (European) world. The indigenous knowledge about the fauna and flora of the region, their knowledge about the environment and the landscape, hunting skills, and knowledge of medical plants were of particular interest and a way to get access to the unknown environment. In recognizing that that which was unknown to Europeans was not necessarily unknown to non-European cultures, Thunberg approached an Alter-identification of the Khoikhoi. In other words, he did not need to rely solely on his own capacities in acquiring knowledge, he could indirectly gain knowledge through indigenous subjects. Among other things, Thunberg observed in 1772 the Khoisan’s use of rooibos, which through Thunberg became known to Europe. Even though he indirectly recognizes the Khoisan knowledge of their natural environment, indigenous people are still remarkably distant in his travel journal. They are depicted in much the same way as he describes other natural objects, plants, and wild animals. The Khoisan are in the background as a part of nature, without individualities. Even though he describes the different groups and their material culture, the description does not differ much from the scientific descriptions of species of birds and their feathers and features. Thunberg does, however, observe the treatment of slaves, that when a slave flees and hides and is later found, he is beaten by his master, but the treatment of a free Christian is even more severe. When he flees from the service of the company he is hanged. The appreciable economic value of the slave saves him from death, contrary to the free Christian who is subject to established laws (Broberg 2016).

To Thunberg, the Khoikhoi are *Alius*. Thunberg’s way of seeing the Other could partly be explained by the objectivity ideal of the natural scientist to carefully describe in an objective manner, without subjective emotions or political objectives. As a naturalist he is an observer making a true statement, not taking an emotional, empathetic standpoint. But this only partly explains the *Alius*-perspective. Another traveller, Sparrman, in the same area, with nearly identical scientific training as a disciple of Linnaeus, had a rather different relation to and understanding of the Other. There is also a personal, situational ingredient to the cultural semiotics of the Other, the challenge to the

intersubjective and empathetic skills of the Ego. Thunberg is reluctant to see the Alter in the Khoikhoi. To him, they are lazy, dirty, and uncivilized.

The African as *Alius* has become the typical way of interpreting the European view of the African, the African as something utterly different from the European, as an uncivilized savage. The fundamental assumption of a dichotomy between civilization and savagery underlies much of the travel narratives (Persson 2019; Persson & Hodacs 2019). Europe is identified as “the civilized world,” i.e. the enlightened, civilized Ego-culture, in contrast to the world outside it, the *Alius*-culture of darkness and savagery. A lot of historical research, not only post-colonial studies, has emphasized the contraposition of civilization vs. nature, humans vs. animals, etc. However, by scrutinizing travel diaries more closely one will find that this extreme case is not the sole, perhaps not even the dominant, view of the African. The relation between the Ego and the Other, the European and the African is far more complex, it is dynamic, changeable, and situational. Next, I will describe a situation where the Other is viewed as an Alter, as something one could relate to, be on speaking terms with, in which one could see a glimpse of oneself.

3 Alter

The context of the encounter, the actual situation, and the relational change over time due to recurrent interactions between the Ego and the Other often triggered intersubjective, sympathetic, and empathetic perceptions of the Other. The relation is very much a situational and evolving relation depending on recurring interactions. Gradually an initial Ego-*Alius* relation could transform into an Ego-*Alter* relation. *Alius* becomes *Alter*. The process behind the *Alius*’s transformation into an *Alter* is to some extent a question of knowledge and experience, and the ability to make use of intersubjective and empathetic skills. The German explorer Carsten Niebuhr, who in the 1760s travelled through the Middle East and “Arabia Felix,” (present-day Yemen) together with the Linnaean disciple Peter Forsskål, wrote: “We Europeans often come to a verdict too early about the customs of foreign nations before we have got to know them correctly” (Niebuhr 1772: x; Dunér 2014). It is equally incomprehensible to the Europeans, Niebuhr says, that the Arabs eat locusts, as it is incredible for the Arabs that Christians eat oysters, crab, and crayfish. People are still quite similar. The naturalist and physician Clas Fredrik Hornstedt, a disciple of Thunberg, who wandered through many countries and climates, and had met the most different people, regarded himself as a citizen of the world, someone who by no means

becomes annoyed that not everything is just as it is in his own country. “The difference consists merely in modifications” (Granroth 2008: 73). When Niebuhr and Forsskål talk about “Arabia” or the “Orient” they do not perceive it as the absolute Other in the sense of Edward Said (1978; Hähnle 2017), or in cultural-semiotic terms as *Alius*. Rather they perceive the Arab culture as something partly familiar. The Arabs were not irrational and primitive, they were possible to engage with, to talk to: they were *Alter*.

The first edition of Linnaeus’s famous *Systema naturae* was published in Leiden in 1735 and appeared in many editions. Vital for its improvement was to collect and add new species. That was one of the tasks of his “apostles” travelling around in the world, such as Kalm, Löfling, Forsskål, Solander, Thunberg, Sparrman, and others. Linnaeus himself had got a request from the Dutch botanist and physician Herman Boerhaave to travel with VOC, but he declined. He corresponded with Governor Ryk Tulbagh in Cape Town. He also received information about the Cape through the SOC captain Carl Gustaf Ekeberg in 1770 and one of his disciples Daniel Solander in 1771. In a letter to Count Carl Gustaf Tessin, Linnaeus wrote in March 1752: “There is no place in the world with so many rare plants, animals, insects, and other wonders of nature as Africa, and it seems as if they have been concentrated to the Cape” (Linnaean Correspondence, L1398; Broberg 2016).

Linnaeus’s system for classifying and naming species triggered an increased interest in the exploration of natural history, not least in South Africa (Forbes 1965; Rookmaaker 1989; Glen and Germishuizen 2010). The connection between colonialism and exploration of nature has been a common theme (Koerner 1999; Schiebinger and Swan 2005; Schiebinger 2007; Huigen 2009; Williams 2013). Mary Louise Pratt argues that after Linnaeus travellers took far less notice of people, forming an asocial narrative: “The landscape is written as uninhabited, unpossessed, unhistoricised, unoccupied even by the travellers themselves” (Pratt 1992: 51; Beinart 1998). As we will see, even though it is tempting to believe in this assertion, it falls apart when one reads the actual travel journals of Linnaeus’s disciples. Very much in focus for Linnaeus’s own travels, for example to the Sámi people in Northern Scandinavia in 1732, was the study of human life and customs, food supplies, and the local use of plants and animals. In his travel instructions to his apostles, *Instructio peregrinatoris* (1759), he expressly requested ethnographical information. Pratt further argues that the Khoikhoi guides are seen only “in occasional passing glimpses” and that “indigenous voices are almost never quoted, reproduced, or even invented” (Pratt 1992: 52, 63–64). According to Pratt, Sparrman merely described the indigenous Khoikhoi as “bodies and appendages,” denuded and biologized.

A not uncommon theme in the writing of history of science is to track down and reveal scoundrels, often conceived as a Foucaultian critique of modernity and its use of science for the oppression of people. Pratt's rendering is a good example of such a critique assigning moral culpability to science, which often proceeds from a fixed and given scheme that is superimposed on the historical past to form an ahistorical narrative that corresponds to one's contemporary needs. The argumentation starts from a set of critical, moral, or political propositions, rather than from a careful reading of the historical sources. The latter would only complicate the argument – and that is exactly the purpose of the present analysis. Such an attitude towards humans in history tends to be in itself an *Alius*-relation. The Ego-historian writes from his or her contemporary Ego-culture and its values, treating humans in history as something utterly different, without voices of their own, depicting them as strange, one-dimensional, evil, immoral – exoticizing and alienating them as a historical *Alius*. The Ego-historian is first and foremost interested in the moral ideals and values of his or her own Ego-culture, not the ones of the culture that was supposed to be the object of study. The other culture in its own regard is irrelevant. I propose that the historian should instead make an effort to transcend the gap between the contemporary Ego and the historical Other, to approach humans in history as ones that are possible to understand and talk to, with a potential self, as a historical *Alter*, at least trying to see the world from their perspective. Key approaches here are to try to access the cognitive and cultural-semiotic processes of humans in history.

As we will see, such generalizing narratives of a moralizing history mentioned above are not always in agreement with the historical sources and records. The historical reality was much more complex, and humans, then and now, behaved and reacted in many different ways. A curious thing is that Pratt's choice of source to sustain her argument, Sparrman's voyage, is a surprisingly unlucky choice. In fact, according to Beinart (1998), if one reads Sparrman, his voyage instead contradicts most of Pratt's claims. The argumentation for the "imperial eyes" of the European naturalist would however have worked better for Thunberg, whom she seems not to have read. There was a third traveller at the same time, Wikar, whom Pratt does not know about at all or ignores, probably because his experiences and encounters with Africans do not fit with her interpretation. What I argue here, in avoiding simplifying interpretations of human behaviour, is that it is hardly possible to claim there was one unified, universal European attitude towards the African. One needs to notice the complexity of the cultural semiosis of encounters. It is necessary to study each case, each of which has its own particular cultural semiotic relations. Depending on the situation, the humans involved, the rhetorical presentation, the attitudes vary from Ultimate *Alius*, over *Alter*, even towards a fusion of Ego and *Alter*.

3.1 Alius becomes Alter: Khoisan as Alter

The initial Alius-relation towards the Other may, through recurrent interactions, turn into an Alter-relation. I will give two examples of this “Alteration process,” first the Khoisan becoming an Alter, and second, the slave becoming an Alter. The focus of much of the research has been the other way around, the “Alienation process,” an Alter becoming an Alius, as in a postcolonial understanding: the human other is dehumanized, becoming an uncivilized brute. This dehumanization, following a cultural-semiotic interpretation, lies no doubt behind the process of the Alter becoming an Alius, something that is utterly different from the Ego, the European culture, which facilitates the colonial treatment of the Other, the subordinates, the “primitive” indigenous people, and the objectified, depersonalized slaves. These cultural-semiotic processes are, however, not unidirectional. In some cases, we can see how others, who in an initial situation are regarded as Alius, may in certain circumstances turn into Alter. This less noticed process is the object of the following.

In a lost letter Linnaeus seems to have proposed that, in order to acquire more knowledge about the South African flora and fauna, one should educate a Khoikhoi lad as a naturalist. By expressing this proposition, it seems that Linnaeus did not find it impossible for a Khoikhoi to understand and learn same things as European boys, even the latest scientific theories and methods. The Khoikhoi is a potential Alter, not an unteachable Alius. The correspondent, Dietrich Wilhelmij – a Swede who lived in the Cape Province 1749–1756 and had travelled in “Hottentot Country,” Kaffraria, and Thembuland – answered Linnaeus on 10 May 1762. He strongly dissuaded him: “But my dear Sir! This does not work. The Hottentot are the strangest nation I have seen under the sun – and I have met most of them in Asia, Africa and America. They are a difficult people to learn to know as you cannot learn their language” (Linnaean Correspondence, L3074; Broberg 2016: 12). The Hottentot might seem peaceful but do not accept any serfdom – they are of no use to Europeans. It would be impossible, according to Wilhelmij, to get natural specimens from them. For Wilhelmij the Khoikhoi remained Alius.

As a disciple of Linnaeus, the Swedish physician and naturalist Anders Sparrman spent many years travelling in order to collect natural specimens and increasing the scientific knowledge of the plants and animals of the world. On his second voyage – after the first one to China in 1765–1767 – he arrived at the Cape in April 1772. He had just worked as a tutor for a couple of months before he left the Cape in October 1772 and travelled with James Cook on his second voyage to Australia, the Pacific Ocean, and South America. He returned to Cape Town in March 1775 and stayed there until April 1776. On this second visit to the Cape Colony he travelled with Daniel Ferdinand

Immelman, a son of a lieutenant, to the interior, going eastward as far as the Great Fish River in Eastern Cape. The accounts of his travels were published in *Resa till Goda Hopps-udden, södra pol-kretsen och omkring jordklotet, samt till hottentott- och caffer-landen, åren 1772–76* (1785 [1783–1818]). His accounts reflect a certain cultural relativism, a constant wrestling with the apparent dichotomy of savagery and civilization.

Sparrman came to a land that belonged to others. That was clear to him. The Cape is the “land of the Hottentots,” both in the title as well as in the introduction of his account. The Khoikhoi were the rightful inhabitants of this part of the world. He complained that the Dutch were “unjust invaders of the Hottentots territories” (Sparrman 1785: I, 241). The way Sparrman depicts the Khoikhoi in one of his illustrations clearly shows the Khoikhoi and the Europeans in their relation to the particular land through which he travelled (Figure 7). Pratt reproduced it,



Figure 7: Khoikhoi and Boers, engraving by Fredrik Acrel, in Anders Sparrman, *Resa till Goda Hopps-udden* (1783).

apparently to support her interpretation. But in fact, as Beinart (1998: 779) notices, it instead directly contradicts her argument. In the centrepiece of the picture are the Khoikhoi. In the foreground we see, set in a bucolic landscape, a Khoikhoi family amongst their huts. They are depicted with the same artistic way of expression as portraits of European landowners asserting their rights to property. Looming in the background however, are the Boers, apparently temporary guests, moving through the landscape with ox-wagons and horses. They have rifles, they are hunting, threatening like intruders. The spatial relegation of the colonists has a certain significance in the picture. The Khoikhoi are the Ego, the Europeans the Alter, in respect to the landscape. Sparrman is travelling through Khoikhoi territory. Even though those places and rivers he encounters often had Dutch names, he regularly gives the Khoikhoi names of them. He also noted Khoikhoi words for various plants, animals, and artefacts.

He did not travel in an uninhabited land, he frequently visited settlers' farms, he locates, describes, and mentions the African people who live there. He was a guest, coming from a nation with no colonial claims in South Africa; instead he was dependent on the Dutch colonial infrastructure. Sparrman often stayed at Boers' farmsteads on the way. The interior had begun to be settled by European farmers in the seventeenth century. Yet he was by no means isolated in a European bubble, but in interaction with people at all levels of colonial society, from governor to slaves, which challenged his intersubjective skills, and compelled a variation of cultural-semiotic relations.

Sparrman strove to get to know the original nature and people untouched by European civilization. To get into the nature, to know the fauna and flora of South Africa, he was very much dependent on the knowledge and experience of bilingual Khoikhoi guides. He mentions his guides and assistant travellers as "my Hottentots," but they are not completely impersonal, occasionally he mentions them by name, for example the "marksman, Plattje" and "Jan Skeper, the most alert and intelligent of all my Hottentots" (Sparrman 1785: II, 2, 255; Beinart 1998: 778). Even though he more frequently names the Boers he visited, he does not ignore their fellow Khoikhoi men, but quite often mentions them. Sparrman's attitude towards the Other indicates an Alter-relation. He distinguishes individual Khoisan people, by name, and as personalities. Unlike in Thunberg's case, the Khoisan were not only different groups of people in the backdrop natural scenery. Sparrman takes some further steps away from the Alius-relation by questioning and avoiding stereotypes. For example, he reports about a man who "had no faith in witchcraft" (Sparrman 1785: II, 32). He sees and recognizes that which seems to contradict routine stereotypes.

In appreciative terms Sparrman noticed the knowledge and techniques of the Khoisan, such as what certain plants and animal products could be used for, and

he openly acknowledged his servants from whom he had directly learnt this (Beinart 1998). Their way of finding water (with the help of their animals) impressed him, as well as their tracking technique that revealed the “faculty of observation, and judgment of the Hottentots” (Sparman 1785: II, 295). Sparman noted: “The African colonists, who are not near so forward to investigate the virtues of the plants of this country as by encroachments to increase their property” (Sparman 1785: II, 95). While colonization and firearms made the Khoikhoi “less exposed to the ravages of this fierce animal,” the lion, nevertheless Sparman says, “I could not but agree with them, that the colonists themselves were a much greater scourge to them than all the wild beasts of their country put together” (Sparman 1785: II, 45; Beinart 1998: 782–783). Sparman praised the Khoisan’s moderation towards their tyrants, and he found it easy to understand why they wished to escape subjugation in their desire to regain “their liberty, the greatest of all treasures” (Sparman 1785: I, 204; Beinart 1998: 787). Their “precious right of liberty” is “bestowed on them by nature” (Sparman 1785: II, 340; Ogden 2012). To Sparman the Khoisan were an *Alter*, with whom one could exchange knowledge, who had certain knowledge of their own, often superior to the knowledge of the European settlers. They have the same faculties and emotions as other human beings.

3.2 *Alius* becomes *Alter*: The Slave as *Alter*

During Sparman’s stay in the Cape Colony he witnessed the treatment of slaves. The slave trade was, according to Sparman, a “violent outrage to the natural rights of mankind, always in itself a crime, and which leads to all manner of misdemeanours and wickedness” (Sparman 1785: I, 205; Beinart 1998: 786). In his travel journal from the Cape he writes: “Many a time, especially in the mornings and evenings, have I seen in various places unhappy slaves, who with the most dismal cries and lamentations, were suffering the immoderately severe punishments inflicted on them by their masters” (Sparman 1785: II, 340). The slave traders’ behaviour not only stirs his empathetic feelings, it is immoral and inhuman: “and not only is the capture of the Hottentots considered by them merely as a party of pleasure, but in cold blood they destroy the bands which nature has knit between husbands and their wives and children” (Sparman 1785: I, 205). His ability to see the human traits of the slaves, his *Alter*-identification, not only makes him attentive towards the abuses suffered by the slaves, but also makes him able to see the situation from their perspective. He understands why they revolt; he is even ready to defend their right to resist (Ogden 2012).

Sparman's condemnation of slavery in his travel account from the Cape, published in English in 1785, soon became known in the British abolitionist movement. In a prize-winning essay against the slave trade, *Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species Particularly the African* (1786), Thomas Clarkson extensively quoted from Sparman's voyage showing the cruel treatment of the Africans. Clarkson, who became one of the main figures of the abolitionist movement in Britain, exclaimed after reading Sparman's account: "With what horror do these passages strike us! What indignation do they raise in our breasts, when we reflect, that a part of the human species are considered as *game*, and that *parties of pleasure* are made for their *destruction*!" (Clarkson 1786: 47).

On his third journey Sparman had another decisive experience of slavery. Together with Carl Bernhard Wadström and the chemist Carl Axel Arrhenius he travelled to Senegal in West Africa in 1787. The scientific expedition aimed at getting into the interior of Western Africa, but while waiting in vain for a permit to travel through the territories of the local kings, they spent most of the time on the island of Gorée off the coast of present-day Dakar. Beside the scientific motives, there might have been economic and colonial motives behind the expedition (Weiss 2016b). Sweden had recently acquired the Caribbean island of Saint-Barthélemy from France in 1784 (Weiss 2016a). In 1786 a Swedish West India Company had been established with the right to trade in slaves. The intentions of King Gustav III might have been to establish a Swedish post in Africa.

The party arrived at Île de Gorée on 16 October 1787. Here on the slave island of Gorée, from where slaves were gathered from the hinterland and further deported to the plantations in the West Indies (Klein 1998; Brooks 2010), they were confronted with another human reality. Wadström talked to a slave who told him his own life story. He also talked to a European who in every black person saw a pursuer, who wanted to avenge his kidnapped women and children. He quarrelled with respected persons about the black people, who they believed to be something in-between humans and animals. Even people who in scientific matters belonged to the enlightened maintained this, which displeased Wadström. In contrast, Wadström asserted that black people do not have less intellectual power than Europeans.

While spending most of the time on the island they also had the opportunity to make a few excursions to the mainland. They met one of the local kings, Barbasin of Joal, who, according to Sparman, could use his almost unlimited power over his subjects, to sell his own children or prime minister. He examined the king who suffered from alcoholism – alcohol was, by the way, one of the European export products used to procure slaves. During the two and half months stay in West Africa Sparman and Wadström witnessed and collected information about the entire trade chain, from the capture of innocent Africans

to the marketing, containment, and shipping of the slaves from the slave island of Gorée. This inhumane treatment shocked them deeply.

Wadström wrote about his experience of slavery in his travel account, published in 1811–1812. It was hideous and painful for him to see the poor captives locked in chains and dragged away. He then often thought “that even the black has a feeling for his freedom, his women and children, his friends and his native country,” and he hoped to be like the novelist Laurence Sterne when he liberated the captured bird from the cage (Wadström 1811–12: 6.1, 67). They were so tightly chained that their legs were swollen. “I saw the wretched one, bound in chains, in deep thought, and – I sacrificed a tear on the altar of humanity” (Wadström 1811–12: 6.2, 65). One day he followed the slave agent Peletan to a depot where captured slaves were kept. It was a woe scene, Wadström relates, to see unhappy people covered with bleeding wounds, in chains, how they lay like sacrificial animals in the sand without anything to cover them during cold winter nights. It is rather obvious that the actual encounter with the Other changed Sparrman and Wadström and their view of slavery. While in Africa, their intersubjectivity was triggered by their encounters with the Africans. They could no longer look aside, stranded on a slave island the slave trade was in front of their eyes. Cultural encounters are transformative, lead to a transformation of the traveller. They came to Africa as explorers in natural history, they returned to Europe as abolitionist activists testifying to the horrors that they had seen with their own eyes.

On the way home from Senegal in 1788, Sparrman and Wadström made a visit to London and testified in front of a committee of inquiry into the slave trade, set up by the British Privy Council. The committee asked them about how the slaves were procured. Sparrman gave a detailed account of what he had seen. He explained: “When the Kings of the Country want Slaves for the Purchase of Goods, they send their Horsemen in the Night to the Villages to make as many Slaves as they can.” Slaves could also be obtained through war, kidnapping, or just by seizing persons for real or invented crimes. They divulged that the captains of slave ships kept a supply of poison on board by which they could secretly get rid of slaves in the case of low provision or longer periods of calm weather. As a medical doctor Sparrman had examined some slaves, but they “trembled with Fear, thinking he was a Purchaser, and would send them to the Islands, which they dread” (Lambert 1975: Vol. 69, 24–25; Ogden 2012).

Sparrman’s condemnation of slavery rested not only on ethical grounds. He also had economic arguments against it. Setting up colonies and encouraging economic development in West Africa would be a way to avert the slave trade. Apparently, as Daniel Ogden (2012) remarks, he sees the link between consumer demand and the existence of the slave trade. His condemnation was effectual

perhaps because of these economic arguments. Moral arguments had been used before in the abolition movement, as it seems, with rather limited success. By seeing the African as an economic creature, an independent agent in the world trade as a producer of merchandises, Sparrman also conceived of the African as an Alter that could sell crops, handicrafts, or other exotic goods like ostrich feathers and ivory for the global market, on equal terms with Europeans. By integrating the Africans in the global trade of consumer goods, one could cut off the Atlantic slave trade.

Even his profession as naturalist, trained in “objectivity” and rational thinking, as an impartial seeker of truth, might have led Sparrman to be regarded as a trustworthy witness. That Sparrman and Wadström were trained in the natural sciences enabled a scientific rhetoric that stands out among the moral and sentimental rhetoric – with its call for emotions and feelings of sympathy (Carey 2005) – that dominated the abolitionist movement. According to Klas Rönnbäck (2013) this science-based rhetoric was one of the factors that contributed to the success of the campaign against slavery. Sparrman and Wadström did not primarily appeal to emotions and morality, but to reason, to logical and empirical evidence. Here Sparrman’s rather emotionless testimony, seemingly lacking sentimental arguments, was especially convincing, compared to other witnesses including Wadström. His status as a naturalist, a keen observer, informed in Linnaean systematics, knowing how to describe things with accuracy, made him an unbiased objective teller of the truth. His, in this situation, pertinent account might seem to deviate from his appeal to empathetic feelings that we saw in his travel journal. This shift in addressing a cause could be interpreted as an instance of the situational aspect of cultural semiotics. In his travel journal, aimed at a general public, he strove to stir the feelings of his readers – to make a good, engaging story. For the committee, he applied a different rhetoric by using the truth-claiming resources of science – reason, objectivity, and autopsy – in order to achieve political change.

There was also another reason for Sparrman and Wadström to see the African as an Alter. They were Christian brothers. Both Sparrman and Wadström were inspired by Swedenborgian ideas (Ambjörnsson 1981; Ahlskog 2010). According to the visionary Emanuel Swedenborg, Africa was God’s chosen land for the New Jerusalem, the African was particularly receptive to the true Christian teachings, and the original biblical word in uncorrupted form was to be found in Africa. A note from Swedenborg’s spiritual experiences, *Diarium spirituale* (n. 5518), says: “The African race is the one in this earth which is able to be in illustration beyond all other races, because they are such that they think interiorly, and receive truths, and acknowledge that they are truths from that ground, differently from other races, for example, Europeans, who think exteriorly, and only receive those



Figure 8: “Cidaris Erit Africo” by Metz after Després, in *New Jerusalem Magazine* (1790).

things in the memory.” An engraving (Figure 8) “Cidaris Erit Africo” by Metz after Després, published in the first issue of the Swedenborgian periodical *New Jerusalem Magazine* (1790), illustrates a memorable relation in Swedenborg’s work *Delitiae sapientiae de amore conjugiali* (1996 [1768]: n. 113–114; Paley 1979). In the spiritual world angels hold a contest concerning “the true origin, virtue, and power, of Conjugal Love.” The learned Europeans were unable to give a correct answer, instead one of the Africans spoke, and suddenly a voice from heaven declared that the golden mitre adorned with precious gems should be given to the African.

Africa was thus the ideal place for establishing a utopian Christian community based on Swedenborg’s teachings, a free-labour colony as a commercial alternative



Figure 9: Swedenborg's map of Africa, in his *Diarium spirituale*, n. 5946.

to the inhumane slave trade. Another Swedenborgian, the Swedish mineralogist August Nordenskiöld, had found a map of Africa among Swedenborg's papers (Figure 9). The sketch by Swedenborg's hand shows where the best Africans are, "namely, the best of them are in the whole tract, D E, but the worse are towards the Mediterranean Sea, H, and at the Cape of Good Hope, F; so that the kingdoms of the best are D E; but they who are towards D B, that is, towards Asia, are not wise, and are infested by those who come thence, because they speak things which they do not perceive. It is like this almost to C; and those who are still worse are towards A, where Egypt is." In that great tract D E, they all worship the Lord and could communicate with the angels through interior perception. However, Europeans "are not admitted to them; and that if they come thither, and are not willing to be their servants, they are sent away from there, by a road at B, and that they are sold by them, in order that thus they may be safe from infestations" (Swedenborg 1883–1902 [1745–65]: n. 5946). In a characteristic way, Swedenborg delineates an entire spiritual map of Africa, based on his theory of correspondences between immaterial space and the spiritual state of human souls. The map renders spirituality visualized in spatiality. In this spiritual geography, the Africans are the masters of their kingdom, and the infesting Europeans their servants.

In *Plan for a Free Community upon the Coast of Africa* (1789) Nordenskiöld made up plans for a Swedenborgian utopia of this kind. In the 1790s, members of the Swedenborgian Church of New Jerusalem in London began engaging in The Sierra Leone Company, operating from Freetown and Bolama in West Africa. The Swedenborgians did not merely reproduce the European stereotype of the African as a savage. Rather, with religious enthusiasm, they created a distinctly different image of the African, living in a continent filled with prosperous nations, a

Swedenborgian Alter. Another Linnaean disciple and Swedenborgian, the botanist Adam Afzelius in the service of the Sierra Leone Company, reaching the mouth of Rio Pongos in 1796, met three Africans that confirmed the existence of the New Jerusalem (Lindroth 1945; Coleman 2005).

The anti-slavery stand of Wadström could be comprehended in the context of European colonization plans for Africa and their connection to late eighteenth-century romantic exoticism (Coleman 2005; Ahlskog 2010). Wadström put forward his view in two works published in London that became important for the anti-slavery movement. In *Observations on the Slave Trade, and a Description of some Part of the Coast of Guinea, during a Voyage in 1787 and 1788* (1789), he expressed his fiercely critical view of slavery: “these detestable markets for human flesh, constitute the last stage of all false principles; the greatest of all abuses; the inversion of all order; and originate solely in that corrupted system of commerce, which pervades every civilized nation at this day” (Wadström 1789: iv). In *An Essay on Colonization Particularly Applied to the Western Coast of Africa* (1794–1795), Wadström defended the possibility and necessity of introducing civilization to Africa by setting up free-labour colonies. The slave trade prevented the economic and social development of African societies. A common argument in the pro-slavery camp was to assert that life in Africa was so degenerate that even a life as a slave would be better. Sparrman and Wadström contradicted this statement. They testified that Africans were in general kind and happy, and the West African societies had a rather advanced economy. It could have been even better, if the slave trade had not affected their society in a negative way. What might appear strikingly modern is that Wadström sees the connection between colonization, the global market and human rights. Wadström pointed out: “We cannot take a piece of sugar in the mouth, which is not stained with human blood and has cost a thousand tears” (Wadström 1811–12: 79).

Wadström believed that the Africans have the capacity to live off their own produce, and they could engage in peaceful trade with Europeans, but if only some good Europeans set up colonies in Africa and showed them how and gave them instructions. Africans were capable of attaining civilization. The committee of 1790 asked him: “What opinion have you formed of the capacity of the Negroes?” And he answered: “I consider their understanding as not yet being fully improved, but is as capable of being in all respects brought to the highest perfection, as those of any white civilized nation” (Rönnbäck 2013: 431). Behind Wadström’s argumentation, as Jonas Ahlskog (2010) has pointed out, was probably David Hume’s theory of the civilization process in which civilization has to do with socialization and the refinement of the passions through commerce, manufacture, and trade. Thus, according to Wadström, one has to start by changing the disposition of the Africans in order to attain civilization in Africa.

The view of the African in these economic plans is rather paternalistic. The European is to the African as a father to a son. This metaphorical way of conceptualizing human relations takes its starting point in family relations (the source domain) that are transferred to other human relations (the target domain). A fundamental human experience is the relations between members of a family, which in turn seem to direct us towards an understanding of more complex relations. In the same way as a father treats his son, the European should act towards the African, that is, with respect and affection, but if necessary with austerity and correction. The colonies, Wadström explained, should rather be viewed as friends and allies, as a father regards his grown-up son, not as dependent and conquered provinces (Wadström 1794–95: I, 63; Ahlskog 2010). This paternalistic pattern, however, seems not to be based merely on an essentialist principle of racial supremacy. The Europeans were not born with certain essential superior qualities; their superiority, according to Wadström, lies in that they were at the forefront of history. When the abolitionists argued for the possible progress of civilization of Africa, they denied at the same time the essentialist view of African inferiority that legitimized slavery. Wadström's view, despite its obvious paternalistic tint, was that the African was an Alter.

4 Ego

The narrator of a travel journal is obviously the Ego who encounters the Other, the Alius and Alter. The Ego-culture of these travellers, Thunberg, Sparman and others, was the North European Protestant culture. They were subjects of the Swedish king Gustav III. In a broader sense, other worshipers of the Christian faith could be included in this Lutheran Ego-culture, perhaps Calvinists and Moravian brethren, maybe even Catholics. These travellers from the Swedish nation clearly saw the mutual commonalities between them and the Dutch, French, and other European settlers in the Cape Colony. They shared common beliefs and cultural references, and also, with the educated, classical learning and European science. They had languages in which they could exchange ideas, preferably Dutch, English, French, and Latin. As Swedes in Dutch service they evidently belonged to the colonial Ego-culture.

The assimilation of Ego and Alter sometimes tends to go even a step further where the sharp boundary between the Ego-culture and the Alter-culture seems to vanish. A person could shift from his original Ego-culture to become part of the Alter's Ego-culture. A famous example is Yuri Lotman's interpretation of Peter the Great's shift to view another culture than his own culture as the Ego-culture

(Lotman 1990; Sonesson 2000, 2016). In this inverted model Peter's adoption of the Western culture as his own, devalued his original one to Non-culture. The Ego becomes an Alter Ego. In the travel literature one could find various cultural semiotic shifts of this kind: (i) the Ego transforms itself to become part of the Alter's Ego-culture, as in the case of Löffling and Niebuhr; (ii) a member of the original Ego-culture becomes included in the Alter's Ego-culture by assimilation or adoption, as in the case of Wikar; or (iii) a member of the original Alter-culture becomes included in the Ego's Ego-culture by assimilation or adoption, as in the case of Olaudah Equiano, aka Gustavus Vassa.

4.1 Ego becomes Alter Ego

One way of dealing with the alien culture – that one can find many instances of which can be found in travel literature – is to try to live as the others do, to adapt to local customs and life conditions, “go native” so to speak. In modern anthropology “participant observation” is a well-tested and popular method to explore cultural and social phenomena, but it has happened that an anthropologist using this method ended up identifying with the foreign culture and giving up his work as an anthropologist – the epitomized case being the American anthropologist Frank Hamilton Cushing, living five years with the Zuni Indians 1879–1884, the first to be described as “going native” (cf. Hinsley 1981). Later the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski emphasized participant observation as a way of experiencing the daily life of his informants in order to gain access to and understand their alien culture.

Partly similar things seem to have happened now and then with scientific travellers. The Linnaean disciple Pehr Löfving writes in 1752, after several months in Madrid, that he now counts himself as a Spaniard. He is “polymorphous, among wise wise, and fools fool,” adapts to the situation, takes different roles, dresses himself in Spanish fashion, participates in Catholic Church services, and finally converts to the Catholic faith (Rydén 1965: 105; Dunér 2006). When Carsten Niebuhr was travelling in the Middle East in the 1760s, he tried to adapt himself to the Arabic culture by making use of his cognitive abilities, such as memory and imitation, in an attempt to learn their language and customs (Niebuhr 1774–1837). Niebuhr let his beard grow, dressed in Oriental clothes, and adopted an Arabic name, Kawādja Abdallah. In Persia he called himself Abdallah Aqa, i.e. Mr Abdallah, and in Syria Mu'allim. In Anatolia, he got the nickname *gâvur* (the unfaithful). But there were limits even to his personal adaptation to the other culture. He refused to convert to Islam and be circumcised.

By following the local customs, avoiding quarrels, putting aside their feeling of cultural and social supremacy, and instead respecting the local customs, the naturalists laid the ground for collaboration with the locals. This could turn out to be a successful strategy, which enabled the naturalists to gain access to the local knowledge of plants and animals, and to engage local guides that could assist them in their search for new species. The tolerant attitude made it easier for Niebuhr to gather accurate knowledge about the world he travelled through. In the beginning he felt fear and dread towards the Middle East, but he soon overcame his nervousness about this other world that was new to him. He was clearly aware that he was the Other – the Alter and Alius – in the Middle East, but he tried to behave as a member of the societies and groups he encountered, that is, from the perspective of the Other as a member of their Ego-culture. He later wrote about his fellow traveller Frederik Christian von Haven that he certainly was a learned man, but he could not condescend to the lifestyle of the Middle East and did not care to socialize with the people of the Middle East on equal terms – and such a man will not come to know much (Baack 2014; Haslund Hansen 2017). To adapt to local customs was not only a matter of getting access to knowledge, it was a way to survive, to avoid dangerous situations and conflicts. The adaptation to local customs, to “the Oriental way of life,” was a sort of cultural and physical acclimatization to the new environment, which prevented Niebuhr and others like him from illness and disease. If they had lived according to Oriental customs from the very start, Niebuhr believed, then all of the members of his crew would have returned home alive. Of the six people in the crew, only one survived, Niebuhr himself. The difference between Europeans and natives was thus not biological, but rather cultural. It was not a question of their physical qualities, but rather their way of adaptation to the local conditions. When the difference was not biological and impossible to surpass, but cultural, it became possible to culturally adapt to the local customs, to the Alter-culture.

By using their mimetic skills, by mimicking, imitating, self-transforming, members of a certain Ego-culture identify themselves, disguise or pretend to be members of the Alter’s Ego-culture in such a way that the members of the Alter-culture instantly admit it or at least give consent to this shift. This is not an easy task, however. It requires rather advanced intersubjective and mimetic skills, not only to be able to recognize the meaning-bearing nuances of the material culture, such as clothes and other artefacts, and to acquire the language of the other culture, but to implement a shift in the mindset, i.e. knowledge about and understanding of the Other’s culture, its symbolic expressions, its myths, beliefs, and values.

4.2 Ego becomes Alter

The Swedish-Finnish explorer and VOC official Hendrik Jacob Wikar, born in Kokkola in Ostrobothnia in 1752, worked as a hospital clerk in Cape Town before he set off on a partly involuntary journey into the interior of Southern Africa. He was a gambler and accused renegade fleeing away from civilization (his own Ego-culture) to parts of southwest Africa where no members of his culture ever before had set foot, to Kamiesberg, Orange River, and Augrabies Falls. He was travelling with the Khoikhoi Claas Barend, or as Wikar also calls him, “my Hottentot travelling companion” (Wikar 1935: 97). He is his brother and friend. Wikar writes in a situation of shortage of food that Claas Barend took pity on him and killed a pack animal.

Eventually, Wikar returned to civilization, hoping for a pardon by presenting a report of his travels. The report, written in Dutch on his return in 1779, *Berigt aan den weleedelen gestrengen Heer Mr Joachim van Plattenbergh van't geene my ondergeteekende ontmoetis wat ik gehoord ende gezien hebbe zeedert dat ik langs de Groote rivier op ende needer gesworven hebbe*, tells about these unknown territories and their inhabitants, including the first map of the Orange River (Oranjerivier). The value of this report, which Gunnar Broberg (2016) has studied in detail, lies very much in its unique descriptions of the rituals and customs of the Khoisan people and, for the purpose of this cultural-semiotic study, in the rare interactions between Ego and Alter, and the shifting Ego perspectives.

Wikar's report begins: “When, after encountering many dangers, I reached the Great River, I found some Hottentots from Little Namaqualand” (Wikar 1935: 21). His expectations soon fail: “according to my information, the Eynikkooas were as yet unknown and unfriendly, which is also true of their own people or the Hottentots, as I learnt later; but they treated me well and were even distressed lest any misadventure should befall me” (Wikar 1935: 23). The chief of the Bushmen named Ouga even, according to Wikar's report, pledged to adopt him as his chosen friend. Wikar accepted. However, he was not able to give him cattle in return for this friendship, only some tobacco, which was nevertheless sufficient. But the friendship between Ouga and Wikar seems not to have been just a formal covenant of peace and trade, it went deeper, if we are to believe Wikar's own words: “I must testify before God and man that he was not only a brother, but even like a father to me in all my sorrow and misery and when I was starving and in danger of death” (Wikar 1935: 39). Elsewhere he calls him “my brother companion, Captain Ouga” and “my faithful brother companion Ouga” (Wikar 1935: 163, 193).

However, language difficulties hindered him somehow from gaining access to their culture. In a rare case of mockery, he says: “At present I am among the

half-breed Baboons, for they are as unapproachable for conversations as baboons. As soon as they become aware of anything they go and sit high up on the rocks and in the mountains just like baboons” (Wikar 1935: 55). But step-by-step he enfolded into the Alter’s Ego-culture: “Now I am learning to live in Bushman style when the necessity arises. I am getting to know edible roots like the one they call ‘haap’ [i.e., a cucurbit]” (Wikar 1935: 57). Wikar was admitted to kraals (an enclosure for cattle) where he exchanged gifts, ate and spent time together with his hosts. Usually he paid with tobacco and corals.

The travel report unveils the narrator’s ethnographical interest in the Other. Blips, Eynikkoas, Namnykoa, Nomakkoa, Gyzikoa and other Khoisan tribes are treated in comparative detail. He notes names and words in Nama, the most widespread Khoisan language (Anders 1937). He describes transitional rites, pubertal and marital matters, including clitoridectomy. He was an observer of ethnomedicine, especially the use of plants for medical treatments. He especially admired the Blips, who were shrewd and intelligent, practised handicrafts and trade, but also sorcery (Broberg 2016). He listens to the traditional music, not without failing to note its expressiveness. The rhinoceros dance resembles, as he says, “one of our ‘contra’ dances which is accompanied by song, not by music” (Wikar 1935: 169–170). By being attentive to similarities and dissimilarities, he learns something. The Khoisan culture mirrors his own Ego-culture.

Generally, he seems to be an open-minded traveller, perhaps partly due to personal inclination, but the cultural encounter and its cultural-semiotic and cognitive processes place him in a situation where he is dependent on friendly relations with the Other, dependent on their experience and knowledge for sustaining the life. The fusion of Ego and Alter was a matter of survival in an unknown and exigent environment. Wikar’s relation to the Khoisan is notable compared to Thunberg, but also Sparrman. Here, the “I-thou” relation is gradually transformed into something approaching a “we,” from Ego-Alter to a new joint Ego.

4.3 Alter becomes Ego

In the case of Wikar, a European was adopted by an African. The other way around is not unusual, particularly in a frame of paternalism. Olaudah Equiano, born within the Igbo culture, in present-day southern Nigeria, tells his story in *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789). He was a former slave with the name Gustavus Vassa living a life with shifting projected identities: “While I was on board this ship, my captain and master named me *Gustavus Vassa*. I at that time began to understand him a little, and refused to be called so, and told him as well as I could that I would be

called Jacob; but he said I should not, and still called me Gustavus; and when I refused to answer to my new name, which at first I did, it gained me many a cuff; so at length I submitted, and was obliged to bear the present name, by which I have been known ever since" (Equiano 1789: 96). His name Gustavus Vassa had political connotations, referring to the sixteenth-century Swedish king Gustav Vasa who freed Sweden from the Danes. In 1738 he became the hero in Henry Brooke's play *Gustavus Vasa*, as someone that stands against tyranny and corruption (Potkay 1994). Equiano's book, which is the oldest surviving autobiography of a slave, described the horrors of slavery and became important in the abolition movement, leading to the Slave Trade Act in 1807. While in the West Indies, he managed to ransom himself. He finally settled down in England and married a local woman.

Prince Peter Panah was the son of the king of Mezurado in West Africa. He had been stolen from his father and sold as slave in the West Indies. After many vicissitudes he was brought to England. Wadström found him in London and redeemed him on 6 May 1788. He got a Christian education and was baptized into the Swedenborgian New Jerusalem Church. He is portrayed, together with Wadström, by Carl Fredrik von Breda, a Swedish artist living in London at the same time as Wadström (Figure 10). In the picture, Wadström is pointing at a book by Swedenborg, *Sapientia angelica de divina providentia* (1764), containing the angelic wisdom about divine providence. Under the book is a map of Africa, the land of the New Jerusalem. The bare-chested Peter Panah looks up to Wadström. Their eyes do not meet. In the background there is a bucolic African landscape with a hut and a palm tree. The picture represents Wadström as a liberal abolitionist fighting against serfdom, but at the same time it depicts the white man who, in a paternalistic posture, teaches the African black boy European civilization. Peter Panah caught smallpox and died in Wadström's house in October 1790.

A common scene is the European father with his adopted African son. A photo from the nineteenth century, taken in Omaruru, Namibia, shows the Swedish explorer and entomologist Gustaf de Vylder (Vylder 1997) with his adopted son Josef (Figure 11). The shy six-year-old boy stands close to his bearded, seated adoptive father, each holding the other's hand. Josef, who was born somewhere in the Kalahari around 1868 into the Onguaoa tribe, had a number of owners before Gustaf received him as a gift from the Swedish merchant Axel Eriksson on 7 November 1874. Eriksson had got him by exchange for a rifle in order to prevent him from starving to death. Josef followed Gustaf to Sweden in July 1875. He was shown as a scientific object at a meeting of the Swedish society for anthropology and geography on 16 October 1875. When Gustaf returned to Namibia in 1879 he left Josef with a foster family in Kverrestad, near Tomelilla in Skåne. He died of tuberculosis on 22 November 1880.



Figure 10: Peter Panah and Wadström. Portrait by Carl Fredrik von Breda, c. 1789. Nordic Museum, Stockholm.

The 17-year-old Sara Makatemele, “Black Sarah” (Svarta Sara), worked for Swedish colonists in Potchefstroom, South Africa, at the beginning of the 1860s. When her master Alarik Forssman and his wife returned to Sweden in 1862, Sara went with them together with the 15-year-old Dina. Sara died in Kalmar, Sweden, in 1903. The author Lina Sandell, who met her, wrote a gospel hymn called “Little Black Sarah” about a little poor “Negro child” that had heard about “the white teacher” and who withstood many hardships in the firm faith in Heaven: “Thus see, the little black Sarah/is white and pure in the blood of the Lamb” (Sandell 1882: no. 73). These examples – Olaudah, Peter, Josef, and Sara – show the transformation of Alter to Ego, the transition from an African Alter-culture (from the perspective of a European Ego-culture) to becoming, through paternalistic

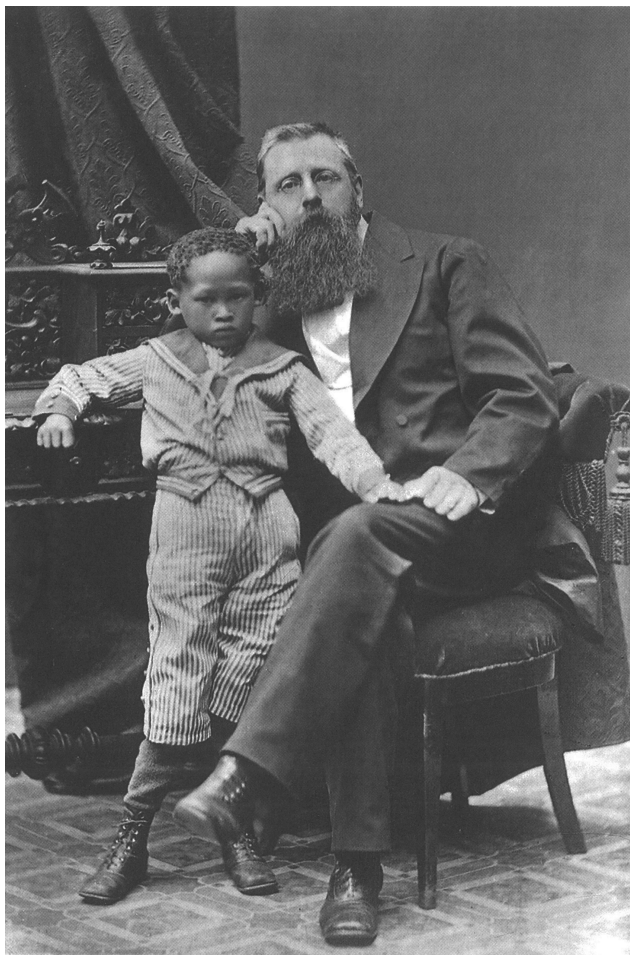


Figure 11: Josef and his father Gustaf de Vylder, Omaruru, Namibia, c. 1874.

care, an adopted member of the European Ego-culture. The cultural shift – as it has been narrated – rests on Christianity, literacy, and education.

5 Conclusion

This study of the cultural encounters of Europeans and Africans in the late eighteenth century, has tried to show, with concrete examples from the historical

sources, the dynamics of cultural semiosis. Aiming at an understanding and explanation of cultural encounters in European colonial history that in many cases led to abuses and oppression of Non-European people and cultures, we need – in addition to ideological, political, and economic explanations of subordination, power, and profit – to delve into the fundamental cognitive and semiotic prerequisites that first and last made colonial repression possible. The travelling naturalists discussed above would have viewed themselves as having pretty much the same cultural background, belonging to the same Ego-culture, a Northern European culture united in the Protestant faith, a political ideology of monarchy and mercantilist doctrines, and as educated travellers they were trained in classical learning and the scientific theories of the day. Nevertheless, their reactions, behaviours, and interpretations of the cultural encounters differed considerably. We then need to study how they utilized certain cognitive and semiotic resources within specific temporal and spatial contexts.

Cultural encounters lead to cognitive and cultural change; encounters between human beings change the way they think and how they understand the world and the Other, but also themselves. The cognitive and semiotic challenges of cultural encounters include the ability to notice cultural complexity, to make use of intersubjective capabilities (such as empathy and sympathy), to recognize human commonalities, and to see the Other as a mirror of oneself. The triadic typology, Ego-Alter-Alius, could be understood as a changing, dynamic, gradual, and situational semiosis that occurs in a specific environment, in a specific moment in time, and depends on the cognitive processes, interpretations, and behaviours of the thinking human beings that engage in cultural encounters. Ego-Alter-Alius are also relational, and whether someone is Ego, Alter, or Alius to another is a matter of perspective.

Alius. One of the contributing factors behind the approach to the Other as Alius is the cognitive challenge of recognizing the complexity of reality. Confronted with the overwhelming abundance of impressions, the mind tries to see patterns, sort them in groups, categorize them, make generalizations, select prototypes, construct stereotypes, and establishing hierarchies. There are two extreme examples of seeing the other as Alius. The first, which I call the Perceptual Ultimate Alius, is when the Alius is something utterly different from the Ego depending on perceptual observation: that they look different or in other ways behave differently than the Ego. The Alius becomes nature, an uncivilized savage, a non-human, a monstrosity of nature. The epitome of the Perceptual Ultimate Alius is the “Hottentot Venus.” The Hierarchic Ultimate Alius on the other hand depends rather on the Ego’s relation to the other as subordinate. The Alius becomes a commodity, a non-human instrument for the Ego’s own aims and objectives. The epitome of the Hierarchic Ultimate Alius is the “Negro slave.”

I also identify two alienation processes in the cultural encounter where a person, a group, or a culture becomes an *Alius*. But who is *Alius* in respect to the Ego is a question of perspective; the Ego could be an *Alius*, and the *Alius* an Ego. The first example is when an Ego becomes an *Alius*, i.e. when the European Ego, the narrator himself, becomes an *Alius* in the eyes of the members of the encountered culture, which includes that the *Alius* in the perspective of the European turns out to be the Ego. Andersson tells the story about when he himself was treated as an *Alius*. In this case the narrator (Ego) is the European, but in rare cases (due to scarcity of first-hand written sources from the eighteenth century) the narrator (Ego) is an African, as in the rock art from the colonial period depicting Europeans and their artefacts seen through the eyes of an African Ego. The other alienation process is when an *Alter* becomes *Alius*, i.e. a potential *Alter* that in principle could be viewed as equal and intelligible, but instead is viewed as something completely different, unequal, and unintelligible. This process is characteristic of colonialism, largely motivated by political and economic suppression and repression, but there are also cognitive factors involved, such as lack of experience, ignorance, and intersubjective deficiency. Thunberg's encounter with the African continent is an example of an *Alius*-perspective towards the Other, even though it is a moderate example of such a perspective in comparison with the Ultimate *Alius*. In his case the Africans became part of nature, uncivilized savages, not much different from ordinary natural objects.

Alter. Recurrent cultural encounters and mutual interactions could lead to the Ego identifying shared commonalities between the Ego and the Other, recognizing a familiarity between them, which is triggered by intersubjectivity, empathy, and sympathy, but also by an acceptance and tolerance of the differences. The Ego perceives the *Alter* as having a potential self. In the alteration process, an initial *Alius* becomes an *Alter* in the perspective of the Ego. Even an Other that commonly would be viewed as an Ultimate *Alius* may under certain circumstances become an *Alter*. In the first case, the Khoisan, the "Hottentot" *Alius*, becomes an *Alter*. Due to recurrent interactions Sparrman deviated from the perhaps expected *Alius*-perspective, and instead viewed the Khoisan as *Alter*. Indications of this view are his appreciation of their knowledge, that he perceives the landscape as belonging to them, that the land was not uninhabited, that he calls them by name, and distinguishes different individuals and personalities among them.

Another example of this alteration-process is the case of the slave, who was often viewed as an Ultimate *Alius*. But depending on the Ego's autopsy, experience of, and encounters with the slave, the expected *Alius*-perspective could turn into an *Alter*-perspective. On the island of Gorée, Sparrman and Wadström encountered the ongoing slave trade, which triggered intersubjective reactions and feelings of empathy and sympathy that led to their engagement in the

abolition movement. This recalls the importance of actual encounters with the Other, to be there and see it with one's own eyes. There were moral arguments for abolition, as well as religious. The African Alter was a Christian brother, and furthermore, according to the Swedenborgians, they had a higher moral standard and a more pristine faith in God. But it was not just a matter of ethical concerns; they viewed the slave not only as a moral subject, but also as an economic agent, who in principle could engage as free Africans in the global trade on equal terms with the Europeans. Even though this perspective on the African as a potential civilized creature had an unmistakable paternalistic tint grounded in metaphorical thinking which conceptualized human relations in terms of everyday family relations, it remains that the slave was for the abolitionist an Alter reflecting one's own humanity.

Ego. The European Ego, formed by the history of its Ego-culture, is commonly the Ego-perspective that is expressed in the surviving sources. But there are processes that seem to blur the established sharp boundaries between Ego and Alter, tending to an assimilation of Ego and Alter, when an Ego/Alter transforms to another Ego. A first assimilation process is when an Ego becomes an Alter Ego, as in the case of Niebuhr, i.e. when an Ego transforms itself to become part of the Alter's Ego-culture. This is a process of adaptation and acclimatization to another Ego-culture that requires and challenges certain cognitive and semiotic capabilities, such as mimetic skills to perform imitation and adjustment, semiotic meaning-making abilities in order to recognize cultural nuances and symbolic expressions, intersubjective skills that enhance the ability to see the Other as someone like oneself, and lastly memory to keep this new information in order for it to be utilized in actual interactions. All this leads to a shift in mindset. The other case is when an Ego becomes an Alter, i.e. when the original Ego becomes included in the Alter's Ego-culture. Wikar was transformed by the cultural encounter with the Other, he moved from his original Ego-culture to be adopted by the chief Ouga (who turned into a "brother" or a "father" to him) and to be included in what was initially, from his perspective, the Alter-culture, which now was seen from its own perspective as Ego-culture. More common is the other way around, when an African is adopted by a European. This third assimilation-process is when an Alter becomes an Ego, or to be more specific, an initial Alter (from the perspective of the European Ego) is included in the Ego's Ego-culture. This way of assimilation commonly has paternalistic traits. The Alter is transformed through education, literacy, baptism, and other means to become part of the new Ego-culture, which happened to Olaudah, Peter, Josef, and Sara.

In all, a cultural-semiotic analysis of cultural encounters, here illustrated by cases of late eighteenth-century encounters in Africa, shows that imagined differences between people and cultures may in certain circumstances be

overcome, through augmented experience, increased knowledge about complexity, utilization of intersubjectivity, recognition of commonalities, tolerance of dissimilarities, and the discovery of oneself in the Other – a cognitive-semiotic process towards a “we.”

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