Racist Caricatures in Iceland in the Early 20th Century

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Abstract – In this article, I take the republication of the book *Tíu litlir negrastrákar* (hereafter *Ten Little Negroes*) in Iceland as an example of how Iceland is often exempted from the global heritage of racism. As scholars have started to explore relatively recently, the Nordic tends to have a hegemonic position as existing separate from colonialism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The original publication of the book *Ten Little Negroes* in 1922 shows, however, the familiarity of racial caricatures in Iceland, especially when contextualized within images of Africa in general during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In my discussion, I place the book within the global heritage of racism, as well as discussing its connection to the more localized and national heritage of Icelandic identity, seeing the book as linking the past and the present in an interesting way.

Keywords – Racism, Iceland, Africa, globalization, caricatures

Introduction

In 1922, an Icelandic version of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Negroes" was published in Iceland with the translated rhyme illustrated by an Icelandic artist. The publication was well received and was republished several times until 1975 and then again in fall 2007. That last republication generated intensive debate that dominated every media in Iceland and revealed different understandings of what racism is, as well as being entangled within emphasis on national "heritage," with some individuals perceiving the book as a part of Iceland's cultural heritage.

In my discussion, I take the book and this controversy as an example of how Iceland is often exempted from the global heritage of racism. As scholars have started to explore recently, the Nordic countries often have had a hegemonic position as existing separate from colonialism and racism of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As I

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explain here, the book *Ten Little Negroes* became localized within heritage discourse in contemporary Iceland as having nothing to with racism, even though the rhyme had been published and distributed in many countries for over more than one hundred years. Due to this constant reproduction of the rhyme and its images in various localities, the book can be viewed as a part of a global heritage of racism, which has especially since the 19th century organized meanings and relationships between different individuals. I thus place the book within the global heritage of racism, as well as discussing its connection to the more localized and national heritage of Icelandic identity, seeing it as linking the past and the present in an interesting way.

In my analysis, I have found Norwegian anthropologist Marianne Gullestad to be especially insightful when she speaks about how ideas of equality have not only been seen as characteristics of the West, but especially associated with the Nordic countries. Gullestad stresses how in Norway this has evolved around the idea of "sameness," in that people need to be more or less the same to feel of equal value.[1] Here I want to emphasize how the idea of equality and the idea of the egalitarian Nordic countries has been a powerful source of identity for people in these countries. It revolves generally around ideas of the Nordic welfare state, gender equality, rationality, and modernity that have become important in branding Nordic countries in international relations.[2] The lack of exploration of the entanglement of the Nordic countries with colonialism and colonial ideologies and legacies strengthens this association between the Nordic and a de-historicized equality.[3]

In the first part of the article, my discussion is contextualized in theoretical insights offered by scholars investigating racism and racial practices as well as the importance of memory in creating and recreating national identity. I then move to analysis of the book in a wide context, its existence within Europe and the U.S., as well as its appearance in a Nordic context. The discussion locates the book in Iceland, contextualizing its images within other images associated with

[1] Gullestad 2002: 46–47.

[2] Wren 2001: 145–146; see discussion in Browning 2007.

[3] Keskinen 2009; Maurer, Loftsdóttir, & Jensen 2010.

the book, furthermore briefly demonstrating how some of the discussions surrounding the book exempted Iceland from the history of racism in the present and in the past.

This article is based on research projects that I have conducted on the images of Africa in Iceland and on national identity and conceptions of multiculturalism and national identity in Iceland.[4] In 2009 I collected material relating to the republishing of the "Negroboys," conducting textual analysis primarily of blog material and other public texts, such as television programmes, newspaper articles, and radio talk shows. Interviews were taken with individuals and focus groups, exploring their views and perceptions of the book and the debates of its republication.[5]

Racism and Creation of Meaning

In the 19th century, racial classifications of human diversity were given scientific legitimacy within Europe and North America, being closely interwoven with ethnocentric ideas of cultural differences. Classifications based on skin colour had certainly existed before, such as in the classification system by Swedish naturalist Carl Linnée in 1735,[6] as well as being evident in the colonial system of overseas colonies.[7] The term "race" seems to appear in the 16th century, but its meaning was imprecise.[8] With the elaboration of ideas of race in the 19th century, a comprehensive system of thought was created that was seen as explaining with the authority of science the presumed supremacy of certain populations and the subjection of others. This meant, as noted by Michael Pickering, that in the early 20th century

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[4] The project Images of Africa in Iceland was funded by RANNÍS (The Icelandic Centre for Research) and the Research Fund of the University of Iceland during the years 2001–2005. The ongoing research on the book *Ten Little Negroes* was funded in 2009 by the Developmental Fund for Immigrant Matters, which is run by the Ministry of Social Affairs.

[5] For this project I have interviewed forty-one individuals, some in focus groups. Of those, twenty-seven are Icelandic, seven are immigrants from Europe or North America socially classified as white, and seven are socially classified as black, the majority with African origin (or, in one case, the parent of a child classified as black).

[6] Pratt 1992.

[7] Harrison 1995: 51.

[8] Wodak & Reisigl 1999: 176.

an entire generation came of age in Europe who did not generally question the basic racist hypothesis that humans could be divided into several racial types.[9] Racial classifications situated people with darker skin colour within uniformed groups with specific characteristics, and likewise situated the "white" race within this hierarchy of mental and cultural characteristics. Even though comprehensive, racial classifications were still never quite fixed or agreed upon, and they were entangled with hierarchical relationships based on other categorizations such as gender and class, as well as prejudice towards certain ethnicities.[10]

Since the middle of the 20th century, scholars have rejected race as a scientific tool for understanding human diversity, seeing racial categorization and racism as reflecting a pervasive social-historical reality rather than being based on scientific facts.[11] More recently scholars have increasingly started to question how whiteness—just as blackness—gains meaning within systems of racial categorization, thus drawing increased attention to the fact that racism is not only about "black" people but also those classified as white.[12] Whiteness should be placed within other dimensions of identity and seen as an unstable and heterogeneous construction.[13] As stressed by Nirmal Puwar (2004), the power of being white and male is found in the invisibility of these categories; they are unmarked and thus normalized and self-evident.

Identifying racism as a type of social memory draws attention to the trans-generational aspects of racism and racist images, which have persisted in spite of harsh criticism of racial categorization and denouncing of race as a scientific category. I find V. Y. Mudimbe's concept "colonial library" useful in reflecting how images and ideas from the colonial period continue to exist in the present, often uncritically reproduced in various media. Andreas Huyssen's identification of memory as a hypertrophy of the present points, furthermore, at how today's constant remembering of past creates a

[9] Pickering 2001: 125.

[10] Pickering 2001.

[11] See discussion in Wodak & Reisigl 1999: 176.

[12] Ware 1996: 119; Hartigan 1997.

[13] Hartigan 1997.

framework for understanding the present,[14] even though that remembering involves, as does all memory work, interplay of remembering and forgetting. Colonial nostalgia is one form of social memory, and in William C. Bissell's reading of Bryan Tuner's work, he points out how colonial nostalgia can be seen as involving a departure of a golden epoch and displeasure with the presumed disappearance of a more simple and authentic world. Nostalgia, as stressed by Bissell, has to be seen as "a social practice that mobilizes various signs of the past" and does so embedded in a specific historical context.[15]

Visual Images of Africa

In the European context, images of Africa have tended to be highly stereotypical, defining the continent as a place of monsters, savagery, and darkness.[16] Even after the publication of detailed scholarly works such as Heinrich Barth's travels in Niger in the middle of 19th century, scholars continued to reproduce the same stereotypical material.[17] As argued by Daniel Miller, Africa could be seen as an "empty profile" onto which Europeans projected their fantasies.[18] Scholars have moreover stressed how the images associated with the continent served as a mirror in which Europeans and North Americans could reflect themselves,[19] similarly to what has been pointed out with ideas of "primitive people" in general creating an "other" with which the Victorian society could reinforce itself.[20] The idea of the "savage" thus constituted a projection of what was both feared and desired.[21] As discussed by Christopher B. Steiner, the images of so-called "savages" are often remarkably similar, which is not due to some intrinsic homogeneity of these categories but the "reductionism inherent in our own representations of other

[14] Huyssen 2001: 15.

[15] Bissell 2005: 223.

[16] Miller 1985.

[17] Miller 1985: 20.

[18] Miller 1985: 6.

[19] Miller 1985; Mudimbe 1994.

[20] Barkan & Bush 1995: 2.

[21] Barkan & Bush 1995: 6.

cultures."[22] Some expeditions had an artist to make illustrations, but many travel accounts were illustrated by Europeans who had never seen the people or societies they were meant to represent. They thus often copied material from other sources, inserting them into their own artwork.[23] Interestingly, in antiquity and in the middle ages, images of Africa in Europe were much more plural than became the reality later on, because even though Africa was often seen as the place of monsters, there existed also more positive and dynamic views of people within the continent.[24] In spite of accumulating knowledge about Africa in the 19th century, the image of Africa became, as phrased by Paul S. Landau, "flattened out" and simplified in the 20th century.[25]

During the early 19th century, Africa was seen as an exotic background for adventure stories that were closer to fiction than reality.[26] As phrased by Robert Thornton, the availability of Africa for many European audiences depended on texts describing the continent. There were, however, many individuals originating from Africa living in Europe. Most of those living in London, for example, were ex-slaves from North America or the West Indies.[27] The visual media in the colonial era with postcards, comic strips, and colonial exhibitions addressing black people and Africa in some ways became extremely popular.[28]

The rhyme about the so-called Negro boys was presumably originally written by the American Frank J. Green in 1864, adapted from an even earlier version about the "Ten Little Indians," and has since been published in many countries.[29] Some scholars believe that "Ten Little Negroes" is the original rhyme to which "Ten Little

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[22] Steiner 1995: 203.

[23] Steiner 1995: 207.

[24] See discussion in Pieterse 1992: 29; Friedman 2000. I have discussed the images of Africa in medieval times in Iceland that reflect plurality as well (Loftsdóttir 2006).

[25] Landau 2002: 4.

[26] Riffenburgh 1993: 14.

[27] Lindfors 2001: 63.

[28] Landau 2002: 5.

[29] Pieterse 1992: 166.

Indians" was adapted.[30] In the United States, black comic figures pushed away caricatures of other groups such as the Irish and became the most popular comic characters. Stanley Lemons notes that there were two peaks in black people's popularity as comic figures in American history, both times when racial discrimination against black people was at its peak. The comic "negro" became popular in the 1840s when slavery was a serious political issue and then again in the 1880s and 1890s when racial discrimination was at its high. Especially in the 1880s, Lemons notes, grotesque caricatures became quite important, representing black people with big mouths and ears, oversized hands and feet, and sloping foreheads, which was supposed to suggest lower intellect.[31] There exist several versions of the rhyme "Ten Little Negroes," but as the Dutch sociologist Jan N. Pieterse points out, they generally have in common that they are about dark-skinned boys who are always children, never learning from experience.[32] The rhyme was published in various European and Nordic countries either in a book format or as a part of a collection of children's rhyme. In Holland it was published at least as early as 1919,[33] and in Finland the nursery rhyme was probably first published in the collection *From Home and Away: A Selection of Fairytales for Children* (*Kotoa ja kaukaa: valikoima runosatuja lapsille*) in 1946, but it was also published as a part of another collection, *Funny Counting Book* (*Hupaisa laskukirja*), a compilation of counting rhymes, which was published sometime in the 1940s. As an independent book, it was possibly first published in the 1960s (*10 neekeripoikaa*).[34] In Denmark, the rhyme was published in Danish at least as early as 1922 in *The Children's Picture Book* (*Börnenes Billedbog*), published by Wilhelm Hansen in Copenhagen, and has been reproduced as a song on various CDs. The illustrations for these books demonstrate both how similar caricature can be observed, but also variability. In one of the Finnish versions the boys are, for example, girls.

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[30] White 1974: 5–6.

[31] Lemons 1977: 104.

[32] Pieterse 1992: 166.

[33] Pieterse 1992: 168.

[34] These books were identified for me at the Finnish Institute for Children's Literature. Jarkko Päivärinta, researcher at the Tempere University in Finland, helped me with finding this information, as did Anna Rastas at the same university.

Figure 1. Front cover of one of many publications of the rhyme in English. Note similarities of these illustrations and Muggur's illustrations presented below.

Nationalism and Images of Africa in Iceland

Nationalistic discourses of Icelandic identity have historically strongly emphasized purity. Jón Jónsson Aðils is often seen as the most influential person in shaping Icelandic nationalistic notions,[35] seeing nationalism as having hidden protective powers that help the nation to keep itself pure from foreign influence.[36] The emphasis on purity of the nation and its language and people has thus often centred on keeping them from elements perceived as "foreign." The Icelandic language, for example, has been carefully kept untouched from foreign influences in an effort to maintain some kind of "pure" Icelandic.[37] Icelanders themselves have been stressed as homogenous and isolated from the rest of the world.[38] Such nationalistic discourses have to be placed in the context that Iceland was a Danish dependency until the middle of the 20th century, and such

[35] Matthíasdóttir 1995: 36–64.

[36] See discussion in Loftsdóttir 2009a.

[37] Sigurðsson 1996; Pálsson 1989: 121–139.

[38] Simpson 2000.

nationalistic discourses attempted to justify and explain the need for Iceland's independence by representing Icelanders as a real nation. Language and medieval Icelandic literature were used as the most important factors in justifying Iceland's independence, as well as being important in shaping nationalistic identity.[39] As pointed out by Guðmundur Hálfdánarson, claims of independence were not directed against the Danish government in Iceland but more presented as the result of what was seen as an "unnatural" arrangement in which one nation ruled another.[40]

Simultaneously, as Icelanders sought to secure their own identity in the late 19th century, Icelandic texts published during that time showed little sympathy for African subjects who were colonized and deprived of their lands and dependence. The annual news journal *Skírnir* published from 1827 reflects how the Icelandic authors saw the Europeans as distributing civilization to the rest of the world, celebrating narratives of explorers and conquests of the continent, while concurrently denouncing the slave trade.[41] Geography books published in Iceland during the late 19th century and early 20th century, furthermore, reflect how racial ideologies were important in explaining how the world was to be understood and related to, subjectively organizing human societies and diversities.[42] These books were often based on Danish geography books and adapted to Icelandic circumstances. Even though racial categorization is presented as self evident, there is little consistency in how racial categories are explained and delimited.

To give an example, Karl Finnbogason's book from 1913 claims that humans can be distinguished into racial types by the shape of head, hair type, skin colour, and linguistic properties. Even though Finnbogason's categorization places primary emphasis on physical and linguistic characteristics, his description of each race (as defined by him) reflects the close association with personal characteristics. Native Americans (labelled Indians in the text) are described as serious, cruel, silent, and devious (*undirförlir*) and Africans (labelled

[39] Sigurðsson 1996: 42.

[40] Hálfdánarson 2000: 91.

[41] Loftsdóttir 2008: 179–180; Loftsdóttir 2009b.

[42] See Loftsdóttir 2010: 85.

Sudan Negros) as kind but loud and talkative. A geography book by Steingrímur Arason published in 1924, however, characterized racial difference as deriving from habits and appearances (*háttum og útliti*) but directly states that racial classification is mostly based on skin colour. Value-based judgements are often clearly spelled out, such as in a discussion of Australian aboriginals, who are said to be on the lowest cultural stage. "Savages" in general are described as having more developed senses.[43]

The Icelandic Negro Boys

The rhymes were entitled "The Negroboys" ("Negrastrákarnir") in Icelandic and published in 1922 with illustrations by Guðmundur Thorsteinsson (1891–1924), called Muggur. They were translated into Icelandic by Muggur's brother-in-law, Gunnar Egilsson. Muggur was well known at that time and became one of the most beloved Icelandic artists. He was known for his beautiful artwork, often pictures relating to Icelandic folktales and landscapes, as well as for creating the first Icelandic playing cards. Muggur was born in 1891 into an affluent Icelandic family, his father being a prosperous merchant in Iceland, which then had a population of only a little over 70,000 people, the majority of whom were poor farmers or fishermen. Muggur travelled around Europe and lived a large part of his life in Denmark as his family moved there in 1903. Muggur stayed in a small town in Norway for one summer in 1916 to work, where he made the illustrations for "The Negroboys."

When illustrating "The Negroboys," he drew monkey-like bodies, thick red lips, crooked teeth, and big eyes. The skin is pitch black and the hands are exceptionally big, making the characters very similar to the ones popularized in the United States in the 1880s and 1890s. Comparing them to the illustrations of the rhyme from other parts of the world as earlier discussed, Muggur's illustrations resemble the ones from the United States and Denmark. I am not implying that he was influenced by these particular books (the Danish publication seems to have been published around the time that Muggur's book was originally published), but more pointing at how widespread such

[43] Loftsdóttir 2010: 85–86.

caricatures of black-skinned people were at the time. Muggur had visited the United States, having spent some time in New York in 1915.[44] As I have already discussed, racist imagery in general was in no way alien to Iceland during that time. The book illustrations thus fitted naturally within the ideology of the time both in Iceland and elsewhere. The racial caricatures become even more pronounced when these pictures are compared with another book by Muggur, entitled *Dimmalimm*, which is often spoken about as the most popular children's book of all time in Iceland. The story tells of a little girl, Dimmalimm, who meets a swan, which turns out to be a prince in disguise. The book has been republished many times and translated into many languages. It is sold in Icelandic heritage and tourist shops. Muggur's drawing of the girl and the prince in his human form underlines childlike features and innocence by giving them large eyes, shy smiles, and timid body postures. They have blond hair and fair skin, thus standing in striking contrast with the monkey-like "boys" in the *Ten Little Negroes*.

Figure 2. The front cover of the Negroboys was the same in its republication in 2007 as the 1922 publication.

[44] Uttenreitter 1930: 31.

The Debate about the Book in Iceland

As earlier stated, Icelandic national identity has strongly been based on notions of purity. Foreigners or cultural diversity were not a part of the image that Icelanders both represented to themselves and others.[45] Following Iceland's rapid economic expansion the number of immigrants increased quickly, leading to immigrants constituting more than 8% of the population in 2008, compared to below 2% in 1996.[46] The number of adopted children has also grown rapidly, as has the number of refugees as well as the number of Icelandic children with parents who have immigrant backgrounds. Probably not surprisingly, various discussions have come up in Icelandic society regarding what multicultural society means in an Icelandic context, as well as how inequalities based on origins can be avoided.[47] Simultaneously, ideas of Icelandicness seem to still be based very much on common origin, as was evident in the economic boom and also in the first months after the economic fall. In various media Viking blood and shared ancestry were strongly emphasized as something helping "us" out of the crisis, almost as it had been forgotten that the regression was also hitting immigrants very hard.[48] The debates about the republication of the book *Ten Little Negroes* can be situated alongside an ongoing discussion of what it means to be Icelandic in an increasingly globalized world, a discourse that is in dialogue with other important discourses elsewhere on diversity, European identity, and so forth. As mentioned earlier, the republication in 2007 was perceived in a very binary way in Iceland where some people objected to its republication, questioning why it should be published today in a more multicultural Icelandic context, and others objected forcefully to such criticism, defending the book as being not racist.

In my analysis of blog pages written at the peak of the debate and in interviews, many express the view that the book is not racist because Icelanders were, after all, not familiar with racism at that time due to their isolation from the rest of the world and that the book

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[45] Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009.

[46] *Statistics Iceland 2009*: 1–24.

[47] Skaptadóttir & Loftsdóttir 2009: 206.

[48] Loftsdóttir 2010.

was a positive part of Iceland's history and heritage, often directly associating the book with Muggur. A media interview with one of the publishers reflects this view: "Many people are fond of this book and find it beautiful. They find it historical and a cultural treasure and for me it is impossible to connect it with racism."[49] This view is also reflected in how many fail to see the book as having any connection to racism in the past. In October, a few days after the discussion started, one person posted a blog on his weblog suggesting that perhaps a new book should be published called *Ten Big Racists* as a mirror upon "ourselves" (referring to Icelanders). Some of the comments that he received stress that the rhymes are a part of funny and silly stories created in the past and that it is just coincidence that the main characters are black, or that this discussion is not fruitful because everyone can be discriminated against, both black and white. Some stated stories about their own children who were teased or beaten up by other children that seem to attempt to affirm that racism as such does not matter.[50] What is visible in many of the comments is that they do not engage with their own position as, presumably, "white" individuals, speaking about "black" people in the terms that "they" should not be offended and even that the book provides "us" with an opportunity to learn about black people. Individuals that supported the book often mentioned it as part of Icelandic culture and their own childhood memories:

> Sorry, I think this is rather funny, I remember I had this book, and I also had *Litli svarti Sambo* [Little Black Sambo, another children's book], even the doll […] I have never felt any prejudice against people with another skin colour, no more than those with differently coloured hair.[51]

Following the criticism of the book other social commentaries were framed within the nursery-rhyme style, such as criticisms pointed at Icelandic bankers, Icelandic farmers, and women's position in the world. In an interview in regard to the publishing of the book *Tíu litlir*

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[49] See interview by Baldursson 2007.

[50] Baldur 2007.

[51] "Sorry, mér finnst þetta eiginlega bara fyndið. Ég man að ég átti þessa bók og ég átti líka Litla svarta Sambó, meira að segja dúkkuna líka (á hana ennþá). Dúkkan var alltaf í miklu uppáhaldi hjá mér. Ég hef aldrei fundið fyrir fordómum gegn fólki sem hefur einhver annan húðlit frekar en annan háralit." Jónsdóttir 2007 (my translation).

sveitastrákar (Ten Little Farmers), for example, the author explains that the book is intended as criticism on government policies in relation to farming in Iceland.[52]

Heritage and Multicultural Society

Some of the discussions focusing on the republishing of the *Ten Little Negroes* can be seen as colonial nostalgia in the sense that they bring images of more "simple" times when such images were not objected to. As such, these public discourses seek to separate Icelandic identity from past issues of racism and prejudice. Contextualizing the publication of the nursery rhyme in 1922 within European and North American contexts shows, however, that the book fitted very well with European discourses of race, and the images show similarity to caricatures of black people in the United States. Furthermore, ideas of racial groups ranked in a hierarchical and racist way were well established in Iceland at that time and were seen as useful in Icelandic schoolbooks in classifying diversity. These debates also reflect how memory continues to be grounded in national discourses rather than global or post-national ones, even in debates that are very similar in different places, as is evident in relation to racist images and multiculturalism. These images and the rhyme itself derive quite clearly from the "colonial library" spoken about by Mudimbe, a product of times where certain people were discriminated against heavily due to their skin colour.

As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the Nordic countries are often seen as standing for equality and are separated from Europe's colonial past. In Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, to take examples, scholars have shown that public discourses emphasize that race has never mattered in spite of these countries being engaged in various colonial and racialized practices.[53] In that context it is useful to recognize that racism is also a part of Iceland's heritage, inherent and self-evident in Iceland's self-conceptions during a specific time period.

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[52] "Tíu litlu sveitaskrákar basla í búskapnum" [Ten Little Farmers Struggle with Farming] 2007: 31.

[53] Gullested 2002; Sawyer 2002; Frello 2010: 74.

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