



Ursula Trüper. *The Invisible Woman: Zara Schmelen. African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaland.* Basel: BAB (Basler Afrika Bibliographien), 2006. 118 S. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-3-905141-91-7.

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Published on H-German (June, 2007)

An Afro-German History from Germany's Precolonial Past

The resurgent interest in German colonialism and its postcolonial legacy has prompted a growing number of scholars to examine long-term patterns of western overseas expansion and how it shaped German discourses of race, nation, and empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One early impulse driving the growth of German colonial studies was Susanne Zantop's path breaking study, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (1997), but few new publications have examined German overseas expansion before the formal period of colonial rule in Africa, East Asia, and the Pacific (1884-1918). This volume, the English-language translation of a work originally published in German by Ursula Trüper in 2000 reaches back into the early nineteenth century to tell a most unusual and compelling story of interracial partnership on the South African colonial frontier. The book recounts the seventeen-year relationship between German missionary Johann Hinrich Schmelen (1778-1848) and Zara Hendrichs (c.1793-1831), a Nama woman fifteen years his junior whom he first baptized and then married several months later. Zara subsequently served as a translator and missionary assistant to her husband, who was employed by the London Missionary Society to convert the indigenous populations of the Cape Colony and Namaland, present-day Namibia. During their travels, the couple entered regions of Namaland that would later become part of the German Southwest African protectorate and were on more than one occasion the victims of assault by local inhabitants. Despite such setbacks,

the Schmelens persisted in their missionary efforts and worked together on the first recorded translation of the New Testament of the Bible in the Nama language, an achievement for which Johann Hinrich was given sole credit (pp. 10-13).

A collaborative project involving a Berlin-based author, two Namibian translators, a Windhoek printer, a Swiss publishing house, and previously unpublished documents from a London missionary archive, this volume and its textual history reflects a set of transnational networks similar to those that brought Zara and Johann Hinrich Schmelen together in the first place. Trüper's interest in reconstructing their lost lives is deeply personal: Zara and Johann Hinrich were her great-great-great-grandparents (p. vii). For the translators, Loretta Carter and Bettina Duwe, the desire to translate the original German text into English stems from their desire to publicize Zara's story as an African female missionary assistant and thereby render her visible as a historical actor who played an underappreciated role in the spread of Christianity among the Nama people (p. viii). The result of their collective efforts is a large-format, well-illustrated volume with approximately sixty pages of historical narrative followed by sixteen small appendices of excerpts from the primary sources used to reconstruct the Schmelen family history. The most important documentation comes from journals and letters written by Johann Hinrich Schmelen to his supervisors, now located in the archives of the Council of World Mission in London. Although she does not cite them directly in her ac-

count, Tr  per includes in a list of recommended readings at the end of volume a number of important secondary works on European missionary work in southern Africa and the history of German Southwest Africa. These include books by John and Jean Comaroff, Klaus Bade, Horst Gr  nder, Horst Drechsler, and Helmut Bley, although several major works on British missionary activity, gender, and interracial sexuality in southern Africa by Pamela Scully and Susan Thorne that would be relevant to Tr  per's account are not included (pp. 113-115).[1]

Tr  per's account itself, however, is almost exclusively a narrative reconstruction of the Schmelens' lives in missionary stations and their travels among Nama villages beyond the borders of the Cape Colony. It details the controversy provoked among the white settler community when word of their marriage became public; assistance that Zara provided her husband in evangelizing among the Nama; indigenous resistance that their religious efforts provoked; the Schmelens' collaboration on translating the Bible into the Nama language; and the difficulties that Johann Hinrich faced raising his family and continuing his missionary activities after Zara's death in 1831. Tr  per's account ends in 1848 with Johann Hinrich's death. She thus makes no serious attempt at linking the Schmelens' activities among the Nama to the later missionary and commercial activities in Southwest Africa that preceded the establishment of German political and military control in the region in the 1880s.

Readers interested in the history of Christian missionary work in early-nineteenth-century Africa are sure to find important information in Tr  per's carefully written reconstruction of the Schmelens' collaborative project of evangelization on the colonial frontier. By translating Tr  per's narrative into English, Carter and Duwe have doubtlessly helped to recover the story of Zara Schmelens from historical obscurity and aided historians in understanding the role of African women as essential auxiliaries to European male missionaries at the time. While scholars interested in the early roots of the German imperialist imagination may be disappointed that Tr  per does not contextualize her story within the broader history of German precolonial fantasy, it is nonetheless instructive to examine the social tensions between missionaries and white settlers that resulted from interracial marriages. While sexual liaisons between white missionaries and settlers with indigenous or mixed race women were common, Tr  per points out, "the actual scandal was not the fact of sexual relations between Europeans and Africans ... but the fact that

the missionaries acknowledged the indigenous women as equal by officially marrying them" (p. 41). When word of his relationship with Zara reached his supervisors in 1818, Johann Hinrich was temporarily suspended until he could certify in writing that the two of them had not consummated their relationship prior to marriage and that the marriage was legitimate, despite the efforts of disapproving administrators who avoided registering his or similar interracial marriages in the Cape Colony (pp. 43-45, appendix 8).

The racial anxieties provoked by the discovery of the Schmelens' "illicit" frontier marriage points to several of the ways in which the story recounted in this volume can be related to broader scholarly currents animating the newest research in German colonial and postcolonial history. Recent works by Birthe Kundrus, Lora Wildenthal, Daniel Walther, and others on interracial marriage bans in the German colonies, which were spawned by fears of contaminating the purity of the German race, offer further evidence of long-standing divisions within white settler populations over the rights of individual missionaries, merchants, and migrants to enter into legally binding relationships with non-white native women.[2] Tr  per's courageous retelling of her family history provides tantalizing clues to the precolonial history of these racial tensions. Tr  per's book also contributes to Afro-German history.[3] Indeed, Tr  per herself has placed her research directly in this comparatively new field by examining attempts "for generations at hiding and suppressing the existence of our African ancestor" (p. viii) played themselves out during National Socialist rule, when members of her family feared that the discovery of their "impure" bloodline would lead to legal discrimination under the Aryan racial regulations in effect in the 1930s.[4]

For all of the admirable archival research that Tr  per has done to bring the long-hidden story of her Afro-German ancestors into the open, the limitations of the existing sources that hinder her efforts to capture anything more than fleeting glances of Zara Schmelens herself are sobering reminders of the difficulties of this type of historical intervention.

While numerous illustrations and letters from her husband and her children are contained in the volume—the Namibian government even issued a postage stamp bearing Johann Hinrich Schmelens' image in 1989 (p. 25)—not a single letter survives that was written by Zara, his beloved wife, tireless translator, and invaluable missionary assistant, nor even a portrait indicating how she

might have looked (pp. 14, 33).

Notes

[1]. Susan Thorne, *Congregational Missions and the Making of an Imperial Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Pamela Scully, *Liberating the Family? Gender and British Slave Emancipation in the Rural Western Cape, South Africa, 1823-1853* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1997).

[2]. Birthe Kundrus, *Moderne Imperialisten. Das Kaiserreich im Spiegel seiner Kolonien* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2003), 219-279; Daniel Walther, *Creating Germans Abroad: Cultural Policies and National Identity in Namibia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 28-45; Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 79-130; Franz-Josef Schulte-Althoff, "Rassenmischung im kolonialen System. Zur deutschen Kolonialpolitik im letzten Jahrzehnt vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 105 (1995): 52-94; Cornelia Essner, "‘Wo Rauch ist, da ist Feuer’. Zu den Ansätzen eines Rassenrechts für die deutschen Kolonien," in *Rassendiskriminierung, Kolonialpolitik und ethnisch-nationale Identität*, ed. Winifried Wagner et al. (Münster: LIT, 1992), 145-160.

[3]. Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingraber, eds., *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890-2000* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005); Heide Fehrenbach, *Race After Hitler: Black Occupation Children in Postwar Germany and America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Tina

Camp, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004); Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst and Reinhard Klein-Arendt, eds., *AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland und Schwarze Deutsche. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Münster: LIT, 2004); Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, ed., *Die (koloniale) Begegnung. AfrikanerInnen in Deutschland 1880-1945, Deutsche in Afrika 1880-1918* (New York: Lang, 2003); Clarence Lusane, *Hitler's Black Victims: The Historical Experiences of Afro-Germans, European Blacks, Africans, and African Americans in the Nazi Era* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Ika Hügel-Marshall, *Invisible Woman: Growing up Black in Germany* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Hans J. Massaquoi, *Destined to Witness: Growing up Black in Nazi Germany* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999); May Opitz, Katharine Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, eds., *Showing our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, tr. Anne V. Adams (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992).

[4]. Ursula Trüper, "‘Das Blut der Väter und Mütter’. Otto Hegner und der Arierparagraph," in *... Macht und Anteil an der Weltherrschaft. Berlin und der deutsche Kolonialismus*, ed. Ulrich van der Heyden and Joachim Zeller (Münster: Unrast, 2005), 243-249; Kathrin Roller, "Mission und 'Mischehen'. Erinnerung und Körper-geteiltes Gedächtnis an eine afrikanische Vorfahrin: Über die Familie Schmelen-Kleinschmidt-Hegner," in *Namibia-Deutschland. Eine geteilte Geschichte*, ed. Larissa Förster, Dag Hendrichsen, and Michael Bollig (Wolfratshausen: Minerva, 2004), 194-211.

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Citation: Bradley Naranch. Review of Trüper, Ursula, *The Invisible Woman: Zara Schmelen. African Mission Assistant at the Cape and in Namaland*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. June, 2007.

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