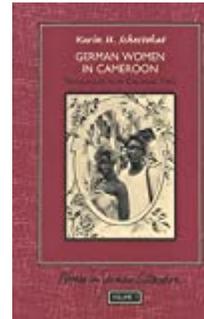




Karin U. Schestokat. *German Women in Cameroon: Travelogues from Colonial Times.* New York and Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2003. x + 204 pp. \$63.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-5538-9.



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Published on H-German (October, 2004)

Snapshots of Africa

The German colonial experience in Africa and the Pacific continues to attract scholarly inquiry despite the relative brevity of the period of formal German colonialism (1885-1918) and the assumed negligible impact of the colonies on Germany's political and economic development. Although the German-language literature on German colonialism is fairly well-developed and still growing, the English-language body of work is much smaller and less comprehensive. Historian Lora Wildenthal recently pointed out the intellectual challenges that emerge when scholars try to relate Germany's colonialism to Nazism and the Holocaust: "Colonialism's connections to Nazism and the Holocaust are both obvious and extremely difficult to specify historically. That may be why recent English-language scholarship on German colonialism has turned to work on imaginative representations of the colonies. Such work seeks to broaden and deepen the understanding of race in the German past by turning to sources produced outside the chronological or geographical limits of Germany's formal empire."^[1] But she also notes the critical importance of studying formal colonial rule—beyond the representational and the imaginary—"because it ranged individuals, groups, and

images in relation to state power."^[2]

A dominant theme among recent English-language studies of German colonialism has been the role of women in colonialism and the gendered dynamics of colonial discourse and practice.^[3] Karin Schestokat's *German Women in Cameroon: Travelogues from Colonial Times* contributes generally to the expanding English-language literature on the German colonial period, as well as more specifically to the gendered study of colonialism. Schestokat's work is an analysis of travelogues written by four German women who traveled through the colony of Cameroon between 1908 and 1920. The four women writers analyzed are Anna Rein-Wuhrmann, missionary with the Basel mission; Grete Ziemann, sister of a colonial doctor; and Lene Haase and Pauline Thorbecke, both of whom accompanied their husbands on medical and scientific expeditions through Cameroon. As such, it fits somewhere between the two genres of writing on German colonialism mentioned above, which focus on either representational or concrete aspects of colonialism. Schestokat is concerned with how these four writers represented their experiences in West Africa to

their readership back in Germany, but she also wants to say something about how educated German women, as outsiders, observed and interpreted the nature of colonial practice and its intersection with African cultures. Schestokat's work is thus situated at a complex intersection of themes—colonialism in theory and practice, European racialized constructions of Africa and Africans, and gender analysis. Schestokat is to be commended for undertaking this type of analysis, because it is both timely and important in helping to integrate German colonial history and women's history into modern Germany's historical narrative and consciousness. She makes these rather obscure travelogues available to a wider readership that would otherwise not have access to them in German. Her focus on German women as colonial participants reminds us that the colonial endeavor was anything but monolithic despite the consistency of perspectives generated by mostly male colonialists in their memoirs and travelogues. Indeed, her use of four women authors who present differing perspectives while still operating within an identifiably consistent colonialist discourse helps readers to view colonialism as a discursive process that operated at both group and individual levels. Her analysis exposes the ambiguities and inconsistencies that often characterize colonial writing of all types.

Schestokat identifies her main points of analysis as “the authors’ purposes for the travel; the degree to which their perceptions changed through the actual experience of journeying through Cameroon, including some observations which caused them to question the colonial endeavor as a whole; and the fulfillment of their stated goal of advertising the colony to potential (female) settlers” (p. 6). She divides her study into eight thematically based chapters, plus an introduction and conclusion. In the middle of the book is a set of photographic plates of scenes from Cameroon, some of which were reproduced from the travelogues, some from various German archives and museums.

Despite the importance of the topic it treats, however, Schestokat's book has a number of problems, large and small, that detract substantially from its overall usefulness for a general audience. At the most basic level, the text suffers from poor editing, disorganization, and awkward writing. Numerous lengthy passages from the travelogues are quoted in the original German, in block form and usually without translations (though inexplicably a few passages are translated in the endnotes), making the text inaccessible for anyone who does not read German. Her tendency to descriptiveness helps the reader to identify with the four travelogue authors and their

experiences, but often these descriptions go unmediated and without remark from Schestokat. Some of the captions under the photographic plates are in English, and some are in German, with no explanation as to why or where the captions came from. The citations for the photographs are located in the acknowledgments instead of in the end matter. Throughout the text, she also refers to photographs not included in the book. The reader must therefore rely on her descriptions of these photographs, since Schestokat provides no way to evaluate them independently. These issues of style and presentation combine to make the book quite difficult to use, even for those with specialist knowledge of her subject.

Schestokat's work also has several more substantive problems. The previously mentioned problem of disorganization is most visible in the structure of the book. Rather than analyzing the authors individually, Schestokat tries to examine them all simultaneously through her chapter themes. Thus, for example, in her chapter entitled “African Chiefs,” Schestokat uses evidence from all four travelogues to demonstrate the authors' fascination with the African chiefs they encountered in their travels. As Schestokat juggles these four narratives in each chapter, constantly pointing up similarities and differences between them and trying to make sense of their observations, the individual identities of the four authors get lost, and the text comes across as merely descriptive with minimal analysis to support the stated aims of her study. The book could have used a more sustained, systematic examination of why and how the four women diverged or coincided on these themes. Although Schestokat says, understandably, that she does not want to “judge the authors of the travelogues from hindsight” (p. 5), we could certainly stand to hear more clear summary statements of what Schestokat makes of the great volume of detail conveyed in these travelogues, beyond the superficial.

Schestokat also has little to say about the context in which these narratives were written and published in Germany. For example, Anna Rein-Wuhrmann, a missionary, published five different works between the years 1917 and 1948. How did her perspective change, or not, over this long period of writing about her collective ten years in Cameroon? What political, social, and economic issues in Germany during these turbulent years affected the writing of these works? Schestokat notes that the books were published to disseminate information about the colony, but with the exception of Ziemann's book, which was published in 1908, all of the works Schestokat considers appeared in 1914 or after,

when the future of Germany's colonies became increasingly unclear. Schestokat thus misses an opportunity to orient her work within the broader current debates in German studies, going on since the 1990s, on the place of the colonies in German memory and imagination in the post-Versailles context.[4] It is curious, for example, that she fails to engage with or cite much of the work done since the 1990s on German colonial fantasies, since the authors she studies clearly participated in the discursive formation of these fantasies.[5]

Partly because of this failure to engage with the work of her German studies contemporaries, *German Women in Cameroon* seems to be theoretically adrift. Although she refers to well-known works by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, J. M. Coetzee, Albert Memmi, and Mary Louise Pratt in orienting her study within the larger discussions of colonial/postcolonial discourse, her explanations of why she uses them are cursory at best. For example, she cites J. M. Coetzee's *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* in her chapter on "Africans at Work" (p. 120-121). Unfortunately, it is by no means self-evident why Coetzee should be considered an authoritative text on African work ethics—certainly there are other scholars who have written about this subject more extensively, but whom she does not cite.[6] Furthermore, she offers none of her own perspective on the theoretical works that are supposed to ground her study. Her explanation of her use of feminist scholarship (mainly works by Sara Mills, Katherine Frank, and Martha Mamozai) on women in the colonies and women's travel writing is slightly better, but also surprisingly short given that her particular topic has not been covered before. In short, anyone coming to Schestokat's book without having read these theorists' works previously will have very little sense of where her work fits. More importantly though, Schestokat's voice and commentary on the theories currently informing scholarly debates in her subject area are noticeably lacking, again detracting from the usefulness of the book for all but specialists.

Schestokat often fails to distinguish her voice from those of her sources, resulting in numerous instances of unfortunate expression. She reproduces many of the racist stereotypes and paradigms that were common parlance for the travelogue authors. While it might be argued that distinguishing between the author's voice and the materials she uses as sources would necessitate an excessive use of scare quotes, it seems well worth the effort to try to make the distinction as clearly as possible. For example, in writing about Wuhrmann's assessment of schooling among the Bamum,[7] Schestokat notes "a

curious parallel can to [sic] be drawn between the development of the girls' school in Fumban and in the German society. In both places, during the first two decades of the twentieth century, access to education was a male prerogative, and open to women only if they came from socially privileged classes. In both cases the girls were taught subjects which belong to the male domain of society. Evolvement [sic] in the primitive and in the advanced society thus seems to run the same course" (p. 68). Schestokat does not clarify whether or not this is her perspective or that of Wuhrmann, and also accepts wholesale the notions of "primitive" and "advanced." The text is rife with examples such as this—she uses terms like "civilized," "natural," "tribe," "savage," and "pagan" with disturbing frequency, and with no explanatory apparatus or sustained attempt to distinguish between her voice and that of the four colonialist women she analyzes. In places, she also seems like an apologist for colonial practices such as segregation: "Before World War I the awareness among the Europeans concerning the equality of ethnic groups had not developed, they knew no better than to keep apart and to insist on separation" (p. 48). It was not that German colonialists "knew no better," which implies a kind of haplessness or naivete, but rather that they, like many others, subscribed to racial ideologies of the time and put these ideas into practice in the colonies.

Schestokat also freely employs the terms "acculturation," "adaptation," and "adjustment" in trying to document the ways that the authors' perceptions changed during their travels in Cameroon. She uses the terms interchangeably. Yet nowhere does she define what she means by these terms and how her work draws on anthropological theories. Thus, for example, she argues that Thorbecke has gone through a process of acculturation because at a certain point in the text, "once she has gotten used to how different [Africans'] features really are, and after she has accepted the fact that Europe's standards of perception are not universally applicable, she is able to appreciate appearances of other races by managing to adapt her expectations. This acquired way of looking soon renders new dimensions and new ideals: It enables her to call the chief of the Bana handsome" (p. 88). This is an important and interesting insight into Thorbecke's text, and the reader is inclined to agree with Schestokat that in some cases these women seemed to adjust their views on Africans and Africa after spending some time in Cameroon. Later she argues that "since [Lene] Haase is not able to overcome her prejudices, acculturation on her part is minimal" (p. 146). But is this acculturation or "personal growth" (p. 165), and what is the difference be-

tween the two? Is acculturation a simple matter of overcoming one's prejudices? Schestokat never tells us.

Schestokat is conversant with the historiography on Cameroon under German colonial rule, but seems to be wholly unaware of other key discussions that inform contemporary scholarship on Africa. In a passage describing Thorbecke's interactions with Hausa traders during a journey she made with her husband, Schestokat writes, "the merchants of middle equatorial Africa are the Hausa [sic], a nomadic Islamic tribe. Trading in Africa equals barter, and it takes strong negotiation skills and can last several days" (p. 43). Although Schestokat seems to be generally aware of the complexities of West African identities and social groupings, passages like this expose a profound disregard for this complexity, collapsing all "African" forms of trade into "barter" and ignoring the fact that "the Hausa [sic]" were also city dwellers, and not the only "merchants" of "middle equatorial Africa."

In another passage, Schestokat examines Ziemann's approving remarks on Duala mimicry of German wedding practices, which Ziemann considered to be one of the "building blocks of the [sic] German cultural development in Africa" (p. 104). Schestokat then argues that "the lifestyle of the [Duala] Bell clan as a whole represents a doubled mimicry of the [sic] German society. Not only do these Africans imitate what they see in Cameroon and which is already a copy of the original German society. They try to out-perform the European metropole by placing its material manifestations into an African setting, regardless of the fact that they have no real use for them. To the colonists this is a displacement of their cultural possessions. They forget, however, that the furniture is displayed in a similar fashion, as are African artifacts in German museums" (pp. 104-105). Schestokat makes an important point here: German colonialists were quick to dismiss local African appropriations of European goods and practices as mere mimicry, and they failed to recognize that Africans too could treat aspects of German culture as commodities (p. 105). She undermines her argument, however, by ignoring the possibility that the Duala and other peoples of Cameroon incorporated these practices and objects for their own locally-informed purposes. She never interrogates the notion of "mimicry," but relies on Bhabha's now famous interpretation of mimicry and colonial ambivalence as though it speaks for itself.^[8] Whether unintended or not, the unfortunate side-effect of passages like this is the reinforcement of ideas of Africa and Africans as being in stasis and desperately in need of European civilization and culture.

On the whole, Schestokat's analysis of the texts and photographs is disappointing because she rarely goes beyond the descriptive to pay close attention to the nuances of the written or visual texts. The moments when she renders close readings of the texts are the most stimulating, but there are not enough of them, and their impact is partially lost because the passages themselves are not translated, or in the case of visual evidence, the photographs are not provided. Schestokat herself notes that "much of the beauty of these accounts lies in passages, which query the European presence and try to understand the African societies on their own terms. And although ultimately these women's doubts about various aspects of the colonial endeavor had no political impact, their formulation attests to a much less unified and imperialistic mind-set prevailing among the colonists than is generally assumed" (p. 169). The strength of this concluding statement belies the weaknesses that plague this study. *German Women in Cameroon* is not suitable for general use in teaching or research, particularly for those who do not read German or who have little background in African studies, although it will perhaps make a useful reference for specialists in travel literature, German colonialism, or the history of Cameroon. At a minimum, hopefully Schestokat's work will encourage other scholars to further study the women involved in German colonial endeavors, as well as to continue trying to explain German colonialism both as discourse and practice.

Notes

[1]. Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884-1945* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 8-9. See H-German review at: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.cgi?path=133871085975457>. Susanne Zantop is considered the seminal writer of this genre, which assesses the importance of German colonial imaginaries in shaping national discourses: Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

[2]. Wildenthal, p. 9.

[3]. See above mentioned work by Wildenthal, as well as Marcia Klotz, "White Women and the Dark Continent: Gender and Sexuality in German Colonial Discourse from the Sentimental Novel to the Fascist Film" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1995); and Krista O'Donnell, "The Colonial Woman Question: Gender, National Identity, and Empire in the German Colonial Society Female Emigration Program, 1896-1914" (Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University, 1996).

[4]. The Versailles Treaty stripped Germany of its colonies after World War I.

[5]. See Zantop, cited above. See also Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998).

[6]. For example, Keletso Atkins, *The Moon is Dead! Give Us our Money! The Cultural Origins of an African Work Ethic, Natal, South Africa, 1843-1900* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1993); Frederick Cooper, *On the African*

Waterfront: Urban Disorder and the Transformation of Work in Colonial Mombasa (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987); and Jeanne Penvenne, *African Workers and Colonial Racism: Mozambican Strategies and Struggles in Lourenco Marques, 1877-1962* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1995).

[7]. The Bamum are one of the peoples of Cameroon.

[8]. See for example, Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," *October* 28 (1984): pp. 125-133.

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Citation: Michelle Moyd. Review of Schestokat, Karin U., *German Women in Cameroon: Travelogues from Colonial Times*. H-German, H-Net Reviews. October, 2004.

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