

Germany-France-Moscow-Africa: Survival, Politics and Identity among German Cameroonians, ca. 1910-1960

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Research question(s)

The project is a collective biography of a migrant group, examining the careers of Cameroonians who spent part of their lives in Germany in the period between high colonialism and Cameroonian independence. Cameroonians were strongly represented among people of African descent in Germany between the wars; they also enjoyed a relatively high visibility, as political activists and as performers in theatre and film (and in many cases, both). Before the First World War, members of the Cameroonian elite travelled to Germany to be educated or trained, and some established families and working lives there. After 1918, they claimed the role of spokesmen for African interests in debates about the fate of Germany's colonies, and led moves for the political defence of the interests of Blacks in Germany itself. Their position was complicated by the fact that after 1919 France and Britain took control of Germany's colonial possessions; German-speaking Cameroonians became objects of French suspicion and German irredentist speculation. At the same time, the anticolonial and anti-racist politics to which a number of them were committed came under the sway of a third would-be *hegemon*, the Communist International. The conditions that demanded that they articulate identities, as they 'represented' themselves in various contexts, thus meant that they did so under stressful circumstances and in the field of tension between the competing claims of different territorial, cultural and political 'homelands'. The National Socialist takeover drove some of them to France and/or back to Africa. After World War II, Cameroonian anticolonial politics displayed peculiarities which seem to reflect the experience of the *dual* colonial past. And just as rhetorical self-identification as Germans was very common among Cameroonians in Germany in the 1920s, positive identification with the German colonial period remains surprisingly strong in post-independence Cameroon.¹

The project takes a detailed study of their lives in the first metropolitan 'contact zone'² as its starting point, but it goes beyond the period of residence in Germany, following their stories into the post-World War II decades in order to explore their experience as a transnational one. It investigates the circumstances under which they came to Germany, the conditions under which they lived (housing, family, employment), the social and political networks they established, including their relations with other Africans and migrants from overseas in Germany and their continuing contacts with Cameroon, and their subsequent careers in France and Cameroon. In the light of information about their circumstances and actions, it asks where we can locate 'identity' in the variety of self-representations they constructed, and in particular how processes of identity construction related to political action. Pursuing these processes into the period of return, it asks how the migrant experience informed decolonisation politics.

Aims & objectives

The first aim of the study is accordingly to provide an empirically grounded account of the nature and consequences of the migrant experience in the case of a particular

group, by illuminating in detail their material conditions of life and the activities that constituted them as subjects of their own history – among the consequences of that experience being the articulation of politically relevant identities. Anticipating final terms of reference for the AHRB's programme on Diasporas, Migration and Identities, it aims to make a contribution to national and international discussion in this wider field. While the focus is on the migrant group itself in a transnational context, the study has as secondary aims (1) to contribute to our picture of early twentieth-century German society – increasingly understood by historians as one shaped by geographical mobility and ethno-cultural variety – the new dimension of in-depth knowledge about an underresearched ethnic group; (2) to situate Germany's brief experience of colonialism within the wider history of colonisation and decolonisation, notably by adding to our knowledge about the direct links between events in Germany and the subsequent careers of colonial subjects, and (3) to test the applicability of transatlantic and transnational studies, particularly as they relate to issues of Black identity and self-consciousness, to the German case.

The target outcomes of the project are a monograph, a journal article, an edited volume of essays and two book chapters.

Research context

In **German studies**, there is a growing literature on Africans in Germany and on the cultural manifestations of colonialism in German history (reflecting research carried out mainly in the United States and Germany), but it remains diffuse and in many respects superficial. A preoccupation with the particularities of German racism and Nazi genocide has meant that relatively little attention has been given to the subjective agency of those who were the objects of racism and colonialism. What biographical literature there is – and it is growing – largely takes the form of reports on individual sources rather than reflecting the outcome of extensive research, and there is no monographic work that considers Africans as a migrant *community*. Studies of German colonies, including Cameroon, draw on a transnational source base and foreground the agency of Africans;³ however, no published study has considered the possible links between the German colonial and migrant experience and post-1945 African independence movements.

In particular, the encounter between Afro-German studies and the work in **migration and diaspora studies** which has developed around Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic has only recently begun.⁴ The approach which problematises Black subjectivity, emphasising the *transnational* character of the Black experience of modernity and the challenge that poses for conventional accounts of identity formation in a world of nation-states, has yet to be applied to a substantial empirical historical study of Black Germans. Given the centrality of discussions about national identity in German studies (particularly since reunification), an approach which allows us to formulate identity as inherently problematic and to interrogate its conjunctural and performative elements can also have a salutary impact on studies of the metropolitan culture.

The results of the project will accordingly be of interest to scholars (including advanced undergraduate and postgraduate students) in German historical and cultural studies and in migration and diaspora (including Black) studies, but also to the wider public interested in the Black experience and questions of ethnic and national identity.

Research Methods

The principal research methods will be the familiar ones of empirical historical research. Where a small number of relatively obscure individuals (we have so far identified 70 by name) is involved, the reconstruction of life-histories and networks requires that a range of sources (including the diffuse secondary literature) be sifted and disparate data combined. This has already begun in the context of a feasibility study for the present project. Archival resources include: the Federal Archives in Berlin (for the records of the Reich Colonial Office and the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Eingeborenenkunde), city or regional archives in Berlin, Hamburg, Bremen, Dresden, Munich, Cologne, Frankfurt/M, and Düsseldorf (particularly for police and welfare records), the records of the Basel Mission, which sponsored the education of Africans, the French National Archives (Section d'Outre Mer) in Aix, the Cameroon National Archives and private (family) archives in Cameroon, local and occupational directories and the press of the relevant territories, and the Comintern archives (RGASPI) in Moscow.

At the same time, the nature of the sources and of the topic call for techniques of critical interpretation, especially in relation to discursive and visual sources. These comprise, on the one hand, sources generated by public agencies which frame the subjects in particular ways; for example, the files of public agencies foreground dependancy, criminality and transgressive sexuality as key themes which require deconstructive and against-the-grain readings. On the other hand, the verbal and visual representations of themselves provided by the Cameroonian subjects will also need to be read critically in the light of recent theoretical work on colonial discourse and Black and migrant writing. One concept that seems particularly relevant to the situation of Afro-Germans is that of performance, which has recently been taken up in German ethnic studies.⁵

Linking the circumstances of these people's lives with processes of identity construction, and in particular integrating the study of (self-) representations with the analysis of evidence for material conditions and actions, poses a methodological challenge to a project of this kind. A second problem is how to construct historical narrative and argument in a transcontinental frame. The 'collective biography' tracing a limited number of interrelated experiences across space and time is designed to answer both of these challenges.

The collaboration between the principal researchers both allows for an effective combination of disciplinary skills and interests (Dr Rosenhaft's expertise in social history, with recent emphasis on the situation of ethnic minorities, and Dr Aitken's in the analysis of colonialist discourses and representations of race) and constitutes a forum for discussion of and experimentation with different approaches. The project has been devised in consultation with Prof. Gesine Krüger (Zürich), a historian of German colonial Africa, who will continue to cooperate with us, enhancing our expertise and the prospects for complementary funding from Swiss and German sources.

In the University of Liverpool School of Modern Languages, the project will benefit from a research context characterised by a strong emphasis on postcolonial and diasporic studies. This includes Charles Forsdick's recently completed AHRB project on travel in French literature, current work on Haiti, France-Asia, the Belgian Congo, and Islam in France, and a projected collaboration among Americanists and Latin Americanists on postcolonial textual studies.

Project management

Dr Rosenhaft's role will be primarily supervisory and organisational in the first two years of the project, during which Dr Aitken will carry out most of the archival research. Throughout the research phase the results of archival research and continuing review of secondary literature will be reviewed and progress monitored, in monthly meetings or (during trips to the archives) by e-mail. A shared biographical and bibliographical database will be maintained and regularly updated and the preparation of conference papers and articles will provide milestones for the consolidation of interim findings.

During 2005-06, Dr Aitken will complete research in Germany and Switzerland and make an exploratory visit to Cameroon. He will also complete an article for submission to a refereed journal. A draft of this will be presented as part of a panel to be proposed for the Annual Conference of the German Studies Association in October 2006, introducing the project and some of its findings in respect of the Cameroonian community in Germany. Planning will begin for an international colloquium, to be held in the spring of 2007. Dr Rosenhaft will take primary responsibility for the organisation of the colloquium and for managing the publication of a volume of essays arising from it, to which both she and Dr Aitken will contribute substantial chapters as well as a joint introduction.

In the project's second year (2006-07), Dr Aitken will continue to carry out research in archives and libraries, concentrating on the French and African sources. He and Dr Rosenhaft will write their contributions to the edited volume. A panel will be proposed for the European Social Science History Conference (proposal spring 2007, conference spring 2008), presenting some of the results of the French and African research. A detailed plan for a co-authored monograph will be drafted and a publication contract secured.

The third year (2007-08) will be devoted to completion of the monograph.

Notes

1. Richard A. Joseph, *Radical Nationalism in Cameroun* (Oxford 1977); Kai Schmidt-Soltau, 'Postkoloniale Konstruktionen der kolonialen Begegnung', in *Die (koloniale) Begegnung* (Frankfurt/M 2003).
2. Marie-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London 1992).
3. Joseph; Jonathan Derrick, 'The Germanophone Elite of Douala under the French Mandate', *Journal of African History* 21 (1980), 255-267; Andreas Eckert, *Die Duala und die Kolonialmächte* (Münster 1991); Ralph A. Austen and Jonathan Derrick, *Middlemen of the Cameroons Rivers* (Cambridge 1999).
4. Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London 1993); Haus der Kulturen der Welt with Tina Campt and Paul Gilroy, *Der Black Atlantic* (Berlin 2004).
5. Katrin Sieg, *Ethnic Drag: Performing Race, Nation, Sexuality in West Germany* (Ann Arbor 2002).