

Diagne, Ibrahima: *L'Afrique dans l'opinion publique allemande. Transferts culturels et formes de perception de l'Afrique dans l'Allemagne de l'entre-deux-guerres et de la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1918-1945)*. Berlin: LIT Verlag 2009. ISBN: 978-3-8258-1812-8; 279 S.

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It is perhaps somewhat unusual to be reviewing in English a French-language publication on the image of Africa in Germany, but what better testament to the transnational nature of the issues at hand. In *L'Afrique dans l'opinion publique allemande*, Ibrahima Diagne, lecturer and researcher at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar, deconstructs the image of Africa and Africans in Germany during the interwar period. Using material from scientific and popular exhibitions, newspapers and journals, and ethnographic literature published between 1919 and 1945, she analyses both the academic and public production of (pseudo-)knowledge of Africa and Africans, as well as the discourses across the two realms.

The first thing that strikes this reader is that there are no visuals included. The interwar era in Germany has traditionally been a rich field for historians of visual culture as it marks important developments in photography (including ethnographic photography) and advertising. As in the Kaiserreich, images of blacks were repeatedly used in advertising tropical products and other items of consumption from soap to biscuits, which arguably had a great bearing on the German public's perception of Africa and Africans. Yet Diagne has decided to take a different angle, limiting her work to textual forms of representation.

The author focuses specifically on the processes of cultural transfer, investigating how both German Africanists and Africans helped shape what were at times contradictory images of Africa in public opinion. Along with revealing the varied image constructed by German ethnographers and linguists, she also attempts to bring to light the agency of Africans themselves in this process – the exact nature of the latter, however, remains somewhat elusive.

The issue is first tackled in earnest in a promising chapter concerning indigenous teachers and informants – *Völkerschau* performers, dock workers, soldiers and other Africans, many of them from the former German colonies – who participated in or taught seminars for African studies at the universities in Berlin and Hamburg. This, indeed, is a fruitful and exciting area of research, because here we really do have a two-way intercultural transfer and collaboration. The author discusses a series of case studies including the increasingly studied Louis Brody (Louis M'bebe Mpesa) and Bayume Mohamed Hussein, but also lesser known figures such as Heinrich Dibonge, born in Akwa in the former German Kamerun (now Cameroon). Unfortunately, apart from a short biography, we learn little about the mechanics of how they contributed specifically to a broader interwar discourse on Africans in Germany. Moreover, it is not entirely clear how this section contributes any original research beyond the work already done by historians such as Susanne Lewerenz, Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst, Pascale Grosse, Sybille Küttner and Peter Martin. A deeper understanding of the exact nature of the agency of these valuable 'go-betweens' still seems to be hampered by a paucity of surviving autobiographical documents.

Diagne's analysis of the German side of the discourse yields more concrete insights. The range of material studied necessarily shows a variety of conceptions of 'Africa' and 'Africans' coexisting at the same time. We have on the one hand the well-known stereotypes gleaned from the popular reception of *Völkerschauen*: infantilisation, exoticism, Africans being seen as at once 'evolved' and 'backward', ethnically differentiated and yet lumped together in one discursive space (p. 169). Yet the survey of specialist publications written by 'Africanists' offers an essential corrective to this image, revealing further nuances (p. 174). Diagne, in fact, highlights the *Koloniale Rundschau* as a unique publication, in that it represents Africa as a site for change and evolution, influenced by colonialism, rather than other publications of the same genre, which see Africa as static, fixed and unchanging (p. 40). Several German ethnologists, indeed, spoke out against colonial ex-

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ploitation and the disappearance of indigenous arts and crafts through Western influence, and particularly the influence of missionaries. Nevertheless, for most in the field, studying the continent and its inhabitants more often than not remained a self-reflexive exercise lauding Germans' 'positive' effect on Africa, as scientific discourse went hand in hand with the politics of colonial revisionism.

Diagne's francophone background lends the work a comparative perspective often missing from contemporary works on German colonialism. This becomes most apparent in the last chapter, a detailed comparison of major works by Siegfried Passarge and Maurice Delafosse, which (though perhaps not explicitly) shows how German Africanists' studies were embedded in a transnational or pan-European network still intimately connected with colonialism. In both contexts, the author contests, scientists played a major role in defining Africa for Europeans during the interwar years, claiming that Africanists in Germany in particular '[ont] tracé les pistes et codifié la grammaire par lesquelles l'opinion publique devait découvrir les réalités africaines' (p. 246). One may still wonder how this resonated with other influences on popular culture, such as Josephine Baker, whose performances also spanned Paris and Berlin, but it is nevertheless a valid point. In the figure of Passarge, who contributed not only to colonial and specialist publications, but also to regional newspapers (p. 209), we can clearly see the influence of scientific discourse and ethnologists on the wider public.

The author's review of a vast breadth of literature thus demonstrates that a number of Germans' conception of Africa and Africans was far more complex than what archaeologist Ina Reck described as 'the picture that one takes with oneself from home of the typical cigarette-shop Negro, an eye-rolling horror with a wide, flat nose and huge lips'.<sup>1</sup> But it also raises important questions about the afterlife of any of these perceptions in today's world. It is certainly true that, as Diagne notes in an epilogue, many Germans' (and other Europeans') image of Africa and Africans is something which is still problematic and should continue to be examined and, when necessary,

challenged.

Britta Schilling über Diagne, Ibrahima : *L'Afrique dans l'opinion publique allemande. Transferts culturels et formes de perception de l'Afrique dans l'Allemagne de l'entre-deux-guerres et de la Seconde Guerre mondiale (1918-1945)*. Berlin 2009, in: H-Soz-u-Kult 06.09.2013.

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<sup>1</sup> Ina Reck, *Mit der Tendaguru-Expedition im Süden von Deutsch-Ostafrika*, Berlin 1925, p. 40.