

Forgotten histories: Recovering the precarious lives of African servants in Imperial Germany

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9 **Forgotten histories**

Recovering the precarious lives of African servants in Imperial Germany

Robbie Aitken

Buried in the *Wöchentliche Anzeigen*, an official bulletin-cum-newspaper for the principality of Ratzeburg in northern Germany, a one-sentence article brought readers' attention to the presence of a Cameroonian servant in the small, southern Alpine resort of Oberstdorf, Bavaria ([No title] 1888, 5). The man, readers of the 10th July 1888 publication were told, was part of the entourage of the sister of Freiherr Julius von Soden, governor of Cameroon, "our colony over there" (5). Despite its brevity, the article is of interest for multiple reasons. Not only does it provide evidence of a growing Black population in Imperial Germany, but it, and many others like it, demonstrates growing interest, media, and public awareness of such Black visitors (see, e.g., "Steglitz" 1885, 4; "Aus Stadt" 1888, 3; "Todesanzeige" 1890, n.p.; "Dunkle Existenzen" 1902, 40). The article also highlights the link that was frequently made between German colonial expansion in Africa and this increasing Black presence. The Cameroonian servant was one of several thousand Black men, women, and children to spend time in Germany pre-1914, drawn there by the intertwined processes of globalisation and the widening reach of European imperialism. As we will see, many, but far from all, of these individuals did indeed come from Germany's newly acquired African colonies of Cameroon, Togo, German East Africa (GEA, parts of present-day Tanzania, Burundi, and Rwanda), and German South West Africa (GSWA, present-day Namibia).

Research into the historical presence of African Diaspora(s) in Europe has tended to be dominated by studies of Black men and women in both Britain and France. Yet since the 1980s, historians and activists have made great strides in trying to recover aspects of the forgotten history of Africans in Germany. Ground-breaking work by the likes of Katharina Oguntoye (1997) and Paulette Reed-Anderson (1995),

among others (Martin and Alonzo 2004; Bechhaus-Gerst 2007; van der Heyden 2008; Aitken and Rosenhaft 2013), has demonstrated the longer roots of Germany's Black presence as well as the active role Black people have played in German history. Such work has been influential in establishing German-speaking Europe as an important site of investigation within the burgeoning field of African European studies. Similar to much of the scholarly work on Africans in Europe in general, these studies have taken a largely biographical approach. This has resulted in a number of important case studies of relatively well-documented lives, primarily of individuals who spent a prolonged period of time in Germany. But, comparable to the majority of cases in Europe before 1914, such individuals were the exception: a plurality of Black visitors did not remain for extended stays. Instead, the fate of this shifting, highly transient population was dictated by the restrictive policies of authorities both in Berlin and in the German colonial territories as well as by the limited grounds for migration that brought Africans to Germany. Often arriving as servants, sailors, or participants in human zoos, their time in Germany was fleeting, and as a consequence, they have left few traces in the existing archival record.

The article in the *Wöchentliche Anzeigen*, therefore, also serves as an example of the challenges that researchers working on the historical presence of Africans in Europe face. How can details of the lives of the more obscure and elusive visitors be recovered? Aside from reporting his visit, the article does not mention even the most basic information about the Cameroonian man—his name, age, the duration of his stay—let alone provide any real sense of his experience of Germany. Nonetheless, were it not for the article's existence, he would be one of many Black visitors to Europe whose presence both individually and collectively remains forgotten and beyond retrieval. The recent digitisation of a wealth of German-language primary materials like local and regional newspapers, as well as memoirs from European colonists and passenger lists from the port of Hamburg, opens up new opportunities to prevent the records of such visitors from being lost. In turn, this can help add empirical breadth and depth to our knowledge about the Black presence in Germany.¹ Indeed, combining the few clues from the *Wöchentliche Anzeigen* with information from a further contemporary newspaper report in the *Hamburger Nachrichten* ("Ein

unvermuthetes Wiedersehen” 1888, 4), it is possible to identify the young Cameroonian as Ndumbe Elokān. Elokān and his brother, Ndine Ndumbe, both spent time in Germany, Elokān with one of von Soden’s sisters in Wiesbaden and Ndine Ndumbe in Langenau.

Employing some of these materials as a starting point for collecting further information, this chapter takes the form of a case study of Black visitors who, like Elokān, entered Germany as personal servants. Personal service was statistically one of the most important migration routes bringing Africans to Germany, as at least a quarter of all African visitors to Germany likely arrived in the service of a European master.² Personal servants were also the most transitory group of African visitors; therefore, they have remained almost entirely neglected in the existing secondary literature on Africans in Europe. In this chapter, the focus is on sub-Saharan Africans, 277 of whom have been identified as arriving in Germany as personal servants between 1884, the onset of German colonialism, and 1914, the outbreak of World War I. The chapter provides empirical detail about the composition of this group while also focussing on moments when the lives of personal servants became particularly visible. These were often moments of crisis in the servant/master relationship that caused short-term visits to be prolonged, such as when servants broke from their masters or when they were abandoned to their own fates. Such crisis points brought their cases to the attention of colonial and welfare institutions as well as local newspapers and helped shape the views of German authorities regarding Black migration from the colonies.

Personal servants

What did it mean to be a personal servant and why, in an environment underpinned by racial exploitation and violence, would Africans willingly become servants? In Germany’s African empire, personal servants were variously referred to as “Boy”, “*Hausbursche*”, or “*Diener*”, and of all the Africans in the entourage of European colonists, they were closest to their white employers (Fabian 2000, 31). Servants were expected to carry out a wide variety of jobs. These could include basic menial tasks such as routine household chores, cooking, cleaning, and the carrying of their master’s

equipment, but they could also include providing essential medical care and treatment for sick Europeans. Additionally, duties could extend to encompass tasks offering the potential of exerting a more active influence on the relationship between the colonisers and the subjugated. Trusted servants could function as interpreters or even be trained to serve as colonial soldiers (for a case study, see Zeller and Michels 2008, 128–34).

There were several reasons as to why Africans willingly became servants. Foremost among these were opportunity and remuneration. In the colonial setting, working in the service of a white European was an increasingly in-demand form of employment which was relatively well paid. In Cameroon in the early 1900s, a servant could earn the equivalent of upwards of 18 Marks per week, while in GEA it could be up to 19 Marks (Ziemann 1907, 85; Morlang 2008, 85). Food and clothing might also be provided. Though considerably less than an African cook or soldier might earn, the amount was more than a porter or a plantation worker would receive. In comparison, it is estimated that German industrial workers of 1913 earned around 25 Marks per week (Bry 1960, 51). The German doctor Adolf Heilborn (1912, 15–16), who toured the German colonies, argued that some local populations he encountered, such as young Waswahili men in GEA, actively looked for employment as servants, while the Wasaramo believed working for European colonists was more lucrative and far less physically demanding than trying to eke out a living from arable farming.

Not all Africans who became servants did so voluntarily. Johannes Fabian (2000, 30) has argued that European explorers in Central Africa often acquired their personal servants as slaves, set free from African or Arab slave traders in order to serve white Europeans. Such a fate awaited a number of Africans who came to Germany, including Hanna Ametoche. Ametoche, likely from Ghana, was a former slave before she became attached to the North German Mission in Keta. She later accompanied Maria Tolch, wife of the missionary Heinrich Beck, to Germany as the former's servant ("Was aus" 1908, 57–61; Passenger List [PL], Hamburg – West Africa, 13 October 1899, A 1 Band 105). In some cases, it appears that members of local elites strategically handed over sons to the service of Europeans in order to cement relationships and to enhance their own influence within the colonial power

structure. For their sons, this was seen as an opportunity to accumulate knowledge and experience of European customs and habits, which could later be of benefit to both themselves and their families (Zöller 1885, 110). Among these personal servants from elite backgrounds who came to Germany were the Cameroonian Ebobse Dido, son of the Duala-Deido traditional leader Epee Ekwalla Deido, and Chabet Amussu Dovi, a relative of King Lawson from Aneho, Togo. To what extent these youngsters had any say in the future that awaited them remains unclear.

For white Europeans, as remarked upon in numerous memoirs, African personal servants were frequently viewed as an integral part of colonial society, playing an indispensable role in their masters' lives (see, e.g., Zintgraff 1895, 442). New arrivals to Africa were advised to quickly find themselves one or two suitable charges. Aside from the practical tasks servants were asked to carry out, Katharina Walgenbach (2005, 172) has argued that they also fulfilled a psychological function. In the African colonies, the employment of a servant was part of asserting white authority and reinforcing a sense of racial hierarchy, upon which white rule was dependent. This was both an outward signal to local colonised populations and an inward signal to other white Europeans. Having a personal servant was a social expectation and marker of status that all successful colonists were expected to fulfil.

Group composition

Looking at the specific details of the 277 personal servants who came to Germany allows for some general comments to be made about the overall migration flow of Africans to Germany; the demographics of personal servants, not unlike the composition of other groups, were heterogeneous (Aitken 2016). In terms of geographical origins, personal servants were from fifteen different sub-Saharan territories, and male servants were often from coastal populations, such as the Kru from Liberia. The majority, however, came from Germany's African colonies, and of those whose origins are known, over 40 per cent came from Cameroon alone. Many were from the Cameroon's coastal Duala population, including children from elite families. Under German rule, Cameroon became the largest plantation colony in West Africa, and European traders, factory owners, and representatives of plantation firms

invariably employed personal servants. It was more typical, however, for Cameroonian personal servants to enter Germany with members of the colonial administration, including high-ranking officials. Paul Waterly accompanied Governor Theodor Leist to Germany in 1893, while Johannes Attang followed the infamous colonial officer Hans Dominik to Berlin in 1897 (PL, Hamburg – West Africa, 6 January 1893, A 1 Band 083 A and PL, Hamburg – West Africa, 12 February 1897, A 1 Band 096 A). Non-Cameroonian personal servants also travelled with members of the colonial administration, such as the Togolese Dovi Kuevi, who was employed by the medical officer August Wiche (PL, Hamburg – West Africa, 10 October 1894, A 1 Band 088 B). Others who came to Germany typically accompanied German missionaries or explorers as well as German citizens with business interests in the German colonies or in Liberia and the Gold Coast.

Of the 277 personal servants under consideration, only thirteen were female. This gender imbalance is typical of the overall African migration to Germany, but it also relates to the colonial labour market. With the exception of the settler colony of GSWA, white settlement in the German overseas empire was minimal, and, consequently, there were few employment opportunities for indigenous African women (Stornig 2013, 290). Outwith GSWA, the factory or colonial households were predominantly all-male environments. In 1885, the German explorer Hugo Zöller (1885, 109) remarked that a suggestion by a new arrival in Cameroon that African women replace African male servants in the colonial household was greeted with laughter. Even in GSWA, employment opportunities for African women as servants were restricted, especially as anxieties over interracial sexual relations in the Empire reached hysterical levels after the turn of the century. It is telling that less than half of the female servants who entered Germany did so after interracial marriage bans were introduced in GSWA and in GEA in 1905 and 1906, respectively. Concerns about miscegenation likely also help to explain why female servants tended to travel to Germany accompanying women, missionaries, or European families with young children, instead of attending single men.

Not only were servants normally male, they also tended to be young. The frequent use of terms such as “Boy”, “*Knabe*”, or “*Junge*” by white Europeans to refer

to male servants was a means of infantilising and racialising African men, but it also bore a relationship to the actual age of many personal servants (Maß 2006, 183). The practice of hiring young children as servants was not uncommon in either West or East Africa (Fabian 2000, 30). The average age of the male servants who accompanied masters to Germany was around 16½ years old, but thirty-five were aged 10 or younger, with the youngest being 5-year-old Essu from Cameroon (PL, Hamburg – West Africa, 15 September 1902, A 1 Band 135). Female servants were also on average around 16 years old, though they ranged in age from 7-year-old Kangono from GEA to 45-year-old Barbara from Zanzibar (PL, Hamburg – East Africa, 4 November 1892, A 1 Band 082 and PL, Hamburg – East Africa, 13 October 1906, A 1 Band 183). As Fabian (2000) has suggested, the young age of many of these personal servants is likely related to the fact that they were acquired as slaves when still only children.

Snapshots of visits

Overall, personal servants, particularly those based in non-settlement settings, were especially transient, both within and between colonial territories but also transnationally. They accompanied their masters, be they members of the colonial administrations, soldiers, missionaries, traders, geographers, or explorers, as they moved from the coast to the interior and back, as they changed postings (even to a different territory), and when they took home leave to Europe. Identifying the specific reasons as to why African personal servants were brought to Germany is difficult, but several general points can be made. In some cases, travelling to Germany was simply part of the job, and servants continued to perform their duties in Germany much as they had in Africa. Equally, it appears that some masters clearly envisaged the bringing over of “exotic” servants to Europe as a means of heightening their own personal status and prestige in Germany. Coverage in several newspaper reports suggests that masters made sure they were seen in public with their Black charges (“Steglitz” 1885, 4; “Friedenau” 1885, 2; [No title] 1893, 6). Some personal servants, like the Cameroonian Johannes Mbida, tended to employers who needed care while returning home due to health problems (see documents in Bundesarchiv Berlin [BAB]

R1001 4457/6 1906–26). For a handful of others, the journey to Germany was framed as a reward for their service by paternalistic masters. On account of his “devotion” to his employer, the young Togolese Meppo Bruce spent six months with Heinrich Klose (1899, 296) in Posen, where he was baptised as Karl Wilhelm. He continued to serve Klose upon the pair’s return to Togo.

Bruce’s brief period of stay in Germany was typical. Like the vast majority of African visitors to Germany, personal servants’ experiences of Europe were limited and their visits dependent upon their entrance with a white guardian who remained responsible for them for the duration of their stay. Their visits, in line with those of their employers, were usually a matter of weeks or months at most. Some, at least seventeen, entered Germany on more than one occasion, frequently with the same master. Conversely, it was not uncommon for masters to return to Germany at different times with different servants. The example of Djomba Sankurru from Dumba in present-day Democratic Republic of the Congo gives a sense of how well travelled some personal servants were. Eleven-year old Sankurru entered the service of the German explorer and later governor of GEA Hermann Wissmann (1890, 186–7) after being purchased from an Arab slaver. He first came to Germany in the autumn of 1883, staying with Wissmann’s mother in Lauterberg im Harz, leaving weeks later for Angola. In 1887, he returned briefly with Wissmann to Lauterberg before leaving for the Gold Coast. While Wissmann was ill in Madeira, Sankurru followed the former’s friend, the colonial bureaucrat Dr. Wolf, to Togo. A third and final visit to Germany was made with Wissmann in 1891. During this visit, Sankurru was baptised, an event reported upon in the international press (“Fourth Edition” 1891, 4; “Wissman’s Man” 1891, 2). This time he left Germany for Tanzania.

While it was rare for servants to spend any prolonged period of time in Germany, the occurrence was not entirely unknown. In 1895, the Togolese man Bonifatius Folli travelled with his employer, the colonial bureaucrat Hering, from Cameroon to Berlin (see documents in BAB R1001 5573 1895–96). Folli remained in the German capital for around a year, where he was trained as a cook, first under Hering’s sister and later as an apprentice at the restaurant Zum Prälaten. In return for the costs of his training being partly covered by the German colonial authorities, Folli

and Hering agreed to the former putting his new cooking skills to the test by entering into the employment of the colonial administration once back in Togo. Folli indeed worked as a cook for a number of high-ranking colonial civil servants in Togo before later becoming a personal servant to Governor Adolf Friederich zu Mecklenburg (Stoecker 2010, 26–7). He returned to Germany with the governor once war broke out in 1914.

The examples of Bruce, Sankurru, and Folli hint at the undertones of paternalism and the civilising mission that frequently informed the servant/master relationship. Part of the German colonial agenda and justification for imperial expansion was to morally and culturally “improve” the character of the colonised populations in line with those of Europeans. Yet underpinning this was a belief in a racial hierarchy dividing Europeans from non-Europeans, the colonisers from the colonised, masters from servants. Within the remit of the civilising mission, it was not unusual for African visitors to Germany to be provided with religious instruction and to receive confirmation or be baptised. In a similar vein, it was not unusual for young Africans from the German colonies to undertake apprenticeships in Europe, sometimes at their parents’ expense, but, as in the case of Folli, also at the wishes of benevolent, paternalistic Europeans. The three cases are suggestive of strong bonds existing between servant and employer. This is reflected in the longevity of their periods of service to their masters, the apparent interest taken by masters in their development, and their employers’ written descriptions of their talents and abilities. In their published memoirs, both Wissmann and Klose strongly praise the intellectual and linguistic abilities of Sankurru and Bruce, much as Hering praises Folli in unpublished correspondence with the colonial authorities. Such positive representations challenged the more prevalent negative representations of Blacks in circulation in Imperial Germany. Alternatively, however, it could be suggested that these close bonds, romanticised in colonial memoirs, instead reflect the dependency of youngsters socialised within an exploitative, unequal relationship with their masters.

Not all relationships survived a visit to Germany, and an extended stay in Europe was more likely to occur when there was a breakdown in the servant/master relationship. Unhappy with ill-treatment or the heavy-handed paternalism of their

employers, some personal servants chose to leave their positions and strike out on their own in Germany. Several other young Africans were simply abandoned, often as the result of ill health or poverty befalling their employers. In either instance, securing an independent existence for these youngsters was fraught with difficulty, and they soon faced financial ruin or health problems that eventually forced them to turn to colonial authorities in Berlin or to European missions active in Africa for aid. This was the fate of 15-year-old Cameroonian servant Karl Mukuri, who arrived in Berlin in 1902. Mukuri left the service of the German officer Stülpnagel, whom he had originally accompanied to Germany, in order to take up a better-paid job with a new master. However, in 1904, after falling ill and spending time in a hospital, he lost his position and was soon without means. He reached out to the Colonial Office to request that they send him back to Africa. The latter eventually agreed to organise his return, while pressing Stülpnagel to cover the costs (see documents in BAB R1001 5577 1902–19).

Restricting migration

Over the course of the 1890s, the Colonial Office in Berlin was increasingly worried about the number of African personal servants who were being abandoned by their masters. On the one hand, their concerns were underpinned by the likelihood of having to carry the costs of returning such individuals to Africa. On the other hand, the disappearance of abandoned African youngsters in Germany, particularly those from prominent families such as the aforementioned Chabet Amussu Dovi, had the potential to upset local relations in the overseas territories. King Lawson himself demanded answers from the German governor in Togo when Dovi failed to return to Aneho within three years after leaving with the German traveller Dr. Krausel and no word had been heard from him for some time (Commissioner for Togo 1893, 82). In August 1899, the Colonial Office took action. It sent a circular to the German administrations in the overseas territories asking that they thoroughly review requests from all Europeans to return to Germany with African servants in the light of recent incidents. One year later, a second circular, this time from the Office of the Imperial Chancellor, warned colonial functionaries against returning home with African

servants. This was the result of newspaper coverage in Berlin claiming that the East African servant Hammis had been physically abused by his master, Lieutenant Förster of the colonial forces, while the pair spent time in the German capital: a circular stated that “the usual methods” of educating youngsters in Africa (read: abuse) were not appropriate in Europe (“Ein schwarzer Ausreißer” 1900, 7; “Um angebliche Mißhandlung” 1900, 1; Aitken and Rosenhaft 2013, 60–63).

Discussions about the presence of African personal servants in Germany fed into and informed a more general discussion about the desirability of African migration to Germany. This was largely motivated by increasing fears over the colonial authorities’ inability to control the movements and experiences of Africans in Europe as well as concerns about the potential financial burden of taking over responsibility for returning abandoned Africans to their home territories. Additionally, by the mid-1890s there was a growing belief that returnees were being corrupted by their exposure to European society and that, upon their return to Africa, they were potentially a destabilising factor in local politics. In their published memoirs, a number of European colonists, including some who had brought personal servants to Europe, warned readers about the dangers of allowing Africans to come to Germany. Hans Dominik (1908, 59) argued that servants who had been to Germany soon forgot the moral and religious education they had received and instead regressed to a more primitive state. For the explorer Eugen Zintgraff (1895, 443), such servants were typically spoilt and developed an unjustified sense of entitlement; they combined the worst characteristics of Europeans and Africans. In colonial discourse, such individuals were described as being “half-Europeanised” or “trouser-wearing” *Neger* (*Hosenneger* or *Hosen-Nigger*)—Africans whose (imperfect) adoption of European manners and dress was dismissed as being inauthentic. This underscored a contradiction at the heart of the civilising mission: that exposing Africans to too much civilisation was dangerous for the colonial project. By 1900, increasingly tighter travel restrictions had been introduced across the German colonial territories, making it much more difficult for Africans to reach Germany and for white colonists to leave for Europe with their African charges. Yet these restrictions appear to have had little impact on the continued flow of African personal servants to Germany: over half of

the 277 servants to arrive there did so after the introduction of these restrictions, and many continued to accompany members of the colonial administration up until the outbreak of war in 1914.

Conclusion

The digitisation of a wide range of primary materials, such as passenger lists, colonial memoirs, and local newspapers, offers researchers new opportunities for furthering our empirical knowledge about the Black presence in Germany in general and about the experiences of servants in particular. These sources, however, need to be treated with caution: the voices of the African visitors themselves remain largely silent, and they can often only be heard through those of their European masters and/or state and welfare institutions. As such, the representations of servants are frequently infused with contemporary racial stereotypes and framed through a lens of dependency and subordination. In this sense, researchers will encounter familiar problems that relate to most of the existing archival source base pertaining to the African presence in both Germany and Europe as a whole, particularly in the pre-1914 period. Clearly this material needs to be read against the grain. In doing so, examples of African agency emerge that challenge an image of the powerless colonial subject: of youngsters who strategically chose to enter service, of others who left overbearing and/or violent masters and struck out on their own, and of others still who developed close relationships with their masters. At the same time, however, another familiar problem persists. As the example of the Cameroonian servant Elokan in the introduction to this chapter shows, much of this material still provides little more than snapshots into African visitors' actual experiences. Nonetheless, as this case study illustrates, it is now possible to recover at least some aspects of the lives of even the most elusive and transient African visitors to Europe in the pre-1914 period. At the very least, the quantitative data that can be mined helps to enhance our understanding of the heterogeneous composition and scale of this African presence.

The digitised sources demonstrate that personal servants contributed significantly to the number of transient Black travellers in Imperial Germany, much as they did in both Britain and France. Servants also shared many similar traits with the

vast majority of other African visitors in this period: they were predominantly young men from a wide range of sub-Saharan territories, but frequently from the German colonies, who entered Germany under the guardianship or supervision of white Europeans. Almost all remained under this supervision for the duration of their stays unless unexpected problems were encountered, such the death of their employer or the collapse of the servant/master relationship. Consequently, very few stayed long term, and the overwhelming majority of servants, and African visitors in general, returned to Africa prior to the outbreak of war. It was never the intention of the German colonial authorities or of the vast majority of African visitors that short-term visits develop into more permanent residency. Instead, this was an unforeseen consequence of World War I. Fourteen men out of the 277 servants in this study, including Bonifatius Folli, were still present in Germany in the aftermath of the fighting. With Germany stripped of its colonies and the prospects of returning home greatly reduced, these men, alongside other then-stranded African visitors, willingly or otherwise became part of a developing and increasingly stable, networked Black community (Aitken and Rosenhaft 2013).

Notes

- 1 The Staatsbibliothek Berlin provides a list of digitised German historical newspapers: <http://zefys.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/web/>, last accessed 14 September 2017. The Hamburg Passenger Lists provide a wealth of information. The digitised lists comprise documents in the file 373–7 I, VIII (Auswanderungsamt I) from the Staatsarchiv Hamburg. They are available through the subscription website ancestry.com.
- 2 This chapter builds on a wider study into African migration to Germany pre-1914, which is informed by a database with information on 1094 African visitors. On the study and the methodology employed, see Aitken 2016.

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