

**GERMAN COLONIAL NARRATIVE ON CAMEROON: PLURI-REFERENTIALITY, CONSTRUCTION OF ETHNOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE'S AND INTERCULTURAL RELATIONS. THE CASE OF URWALD-DOKUMENTE: VIER JAHRE UNTER DEN CROSSFLUSSNEGERN KAMERUNS OF ALFRED MANSFELD / RÉCIT COLONIAL ALLEMAND SUR LE CAMÉROUN : PLURI-RÉFÉRENTIALITÉ, CONSTRUCTION DES SAVOIRS ETHNOLOGIQUES ET RELATIONS INTERCULTURELLES. LE CAS DE URWALD-DOKUMENTE: VIER JAHRE UNTER DEN CROSSFLUSSNEGERN KAMERUNS D'ALFRED MANSFELD / POVESTE COLONIALĂ GERMANĂ DESPRE CAMERUN: PLURIREFERENȚIALITAT, CONSTRUCȚIA CUNOAȘTERII ETNOLOGICE ȘI A RELAȚIILOR INTERCULTURALE. CAZUL URWALD-DOKUMENTE: VIER JAHRE UNTER DEN CROSSFLUSSNEGERN KAMERUNS DE ALFRED MANSFELD<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *Linked to propaganda and the dissemination of informations about colonies, German colonial literature played a very active part in the media campaign for German colonization. The colonial discourse developed by this literature incited the Germans to immigrate to the colony. Therefore, the colonial space became for colonial writers the object of the construction of a diversified knowledge allowing the reading of the relationship of the Self to the Other. This can be verified by the German colonial writer Alfred Mansfeld. From 1904 to 1907, he was assigned as regional manager of the German colonial administration in Cameroon. On the basis of a sample of ethnographic data, he collected many observations on the lives of the colonized and documented them in detail in his travel texts. From his travel writing *Urwald-Dokumente: vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kamerun* (1908), we propose, in this contribution, to show how the narrator-character construct diverse knowledge's about Cameroon. At the end of our analyzes, we will come to the conclusion that the colonial novel, as exotic literary genre, often worked by the concepts of ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony and overhanging gaze, seems to be a vector of interculturality in a colonial situation.*

**Keywords:** *Colonial narrative, Ethnologic Knowledge's, Exotism, Interculturality.*

### **Introduction**

From 1884 to 1919, the German Empire marked the history of Cameroon through colonization. The travel narrative, like the other sub-genres of colonial literature, took a very active part in the media campaign and propaganda for German colonization in Cameroon. The colonial discourse developed by / in this literature incited Germans to immigrate to the colony and to identify with this "new homeland<sup>2</sup>". Therefore, Cameroon

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<sup>2</sup>As a variant of travel literature, colonial literature covers a body of both narrative and / or fictional texts (novels and exotic novels) and non-fictional works (travel booklets, travel journals, and essays). The French comparatist Jean-Marc Moura distinguishes three definitions of colonial literature: a thematic, an ideological and a sociological. According to a thematic conception, colonial literature refers to texts dealing with the colonial question. The ideological definition regards colonial literature as that literature that supports and glorifies the colonial enterprise. From a sociological point of view, the notion refers to the literary activity of a social group, especially that of the colonizers, in the colony. For Hugh Ridley, colonial literature refers to all the fictions that describe the European colonial activity in the *New Imperialism* era between 1870 and 1914. The Romanist János Riesz, meanwhile, defines colonial literature as this literature that: "[...] since the end of the nineteenth

became the object of a knowledge whose archeology was declined in several types. Early in 1904, Felix von Luschan, Director of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology, pointed out the necessity and interest of the Germans in studying the habits, customs and customs of the colonized peoples. In his "*Introduction to Observations and Collections in Africa and Oceania*," he formulated the following question: "How can one seek and create territories in colonies without being fully informed of the nature and native species?" If it is true that around the 1830s, jurists, publicists, biologists and naturalists grouped around intellectual societies to systematize, valorize and disseminate knowledge about "primitive" peoples, this is particularly the case of traveling writers working for the German colonial lobby which Alfred Mansfeld was part of. Indeed, from 1904 to 1907, Alfred Mansfeld (1870-1932) was assigned as regional manager of the German colonial administration in Cameroon. On the basis of a sample of ethnographic data prepared by the Berlin ethnologist Felix von Luschan, he collected many observations on the lives of the colonized and documented them in detail in his travel texts<sup>1</sup>.

I propose in this article to show, from the travel novel *Urwald-Dokumente: Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns*, how the colonial writer Alfred Mansfeld provides the German reader with a diversified and sparse knowledge of the space Cameroon. If it is true that the colonial narrative is not only an intercultural genre par excellence but also the place of cohabitation of discourse and worldviews, it will be a question, as a whole, of how the traveling character organizes his different knowledge about the colonized space. In what ways is the colonial gaze on the reference space organized? How does his knowledge allow, from an intercultural perspective, to account for the relation of the Self to the other? These are the questions I will answer in this contribution. To achieve my objective, I will proceed at the beginning, as a conceptual and theoretical grid, to a clarification of intercultural hermeneutics. To this will be added the "ethnological perspective" developed by Michel Leiris as an approach problematizing the relation of the Self to the other.

### **I. "Intercultural Literary Hermeneutics" and "Ethnological Approach": Conceptualizing Self-Other Relationship.**

One of the consequences of colonization is undoubtedly intercultural contact of cultures. The colonial literatures resulting from intensive contacts between Europeans and non-European peoples, especially Africans, constitute according to Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink:

[...] des véritables laboratoires d'expériences interculturelles diverses, non seulement au regard des différentes représentations interculturelles qu'elles véhiculent et qui renvoient aux multiples formes de contacts interculturels dans l'espace colonial, mais aussi d'écritures interculturelles (Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, 1997 : 21).

Literature, let us remember, allows a confrontation with otherness and with another perception of the world. At the same time bearers of an imperial world, the novels and so called "exotic", but also travel narrative, allow to examine how a culture is thought in relation to others, whether to understand them, to find common ground with them, or on the contrary to highlight differences (Mudimbe-Boyi, 2006).

In his book *The Conquest of America. The question of the other* (1982), Tzvetan Todorov observed that the travel is a discovery of the Other. It is an encounter between oneself and the other. The Other being outside and far away. The meaning and relationship to the alterity depends on the encounter and the attitude adopted in this situation. The

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century, is propaganda for the colonial idea, glorifies the colonial work ... or as said in the colonial texts, 'makes known and love' the colonies."

<sup>1</sup>In the foreword to the text that is the subject of this article, the author states: "Since we, colonial administrators, have the main mission to develop new markets, I used the free time that left me my other administrative tasks to familiarize myself with the habits and customs of the inhabitants of my district". Page 11.

attitude may be marked by the personality of the individual, but is more often influenced by a cultural tradition of relationship to otherness. The Cameroonian Germanist David Simo (2015) shows, from the work of Michel Leiris that intercultural experience, as a form of relationship to otherness, has its source in an ethnological approach. Ethnology is not only the study of foreign cultures, but also an experience of otherness. An ethnological model emphasizing writing as construction rather than as representation was developed by Michel Leiris. His alternative "surreal" ethnography was a beginning that served as an inspiration for ethnographic practice (167-178). Leiris distinguishes between exotism and exotic. The exotic is a distortion of the Other or its degradation as an object of projection. The dismantling of Orientalist discourse here finds its condition of possibility. Edward Said's orientalism, as a metaphor for ethnocentric speech, reveals his ideologies. The disarticulation of this discourse thus makes it possible to fix a framework in which to reconfigure dialectic between the Same and the Other. The ethnological analyzes of Leiris thus put into question the place of Western culture and the consequences of its hegemony. Leiris attaches, moreover, to a criticism of prejudices which he defines as a "preconceived opinion" of cultural origin which opacify the relation to the Other (Leiris, 1969).

In the following of my analysis, I will be interested, first, in the way in which the character-narrator of Alfred Mansfeld describes the space that is characterized by certain diversity. Subsequently, it is a question of seeing how, in an intercultural logic, the multiple knowledge's on Cameroon, enables to analyze the relation between Self and Other.

## **II- Pluri-referentiality and diversity: Cameroon portrayed by Alfred Mansfeld.**

Geographical and physical travel in the true sense of the word, "*Urwald-Dokumente: Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns*"<sup>1</sup> highlights the journey of a German traveler who from the region of Ossidinge describes his colonial journey to the border with the Nigeria. Therefore, the narration and the different forms of perception of the space traveled are part of a colonial logic (Hans-Jurgen Lüsebrink, Moussa Sarga, 2019). From the point of view of the route, one could well say that this is an "upside-down trip" that is to say with (Romuald-Blaise Fonkoua, 1999: 99) "the route that leads the traveler from elsewhere to the colony ».

The narrator-character appears in Alfred Mansfeld as a real traveler with all his features. Cultural objects and the geography of foreign space are considered as referents, which he must report to the reader through a "transfer of cultures and / or knowledge" (Gouaffo, 2007). The representation operates by selection. From the description, sketches of landscapes, by the force of the "participating observation" in ethnography, become spaces forming a geographic region. From a geocritical point of view, the landscapes and the spaces traveled have a referential character. Bertrand Westphal establishes very well the relation between the referentiality of the places and their literary mediatisation. It notes to this effect that:

[...] la géocritique permet d'abord de cerner la dimension littéraire des lieux, de dresser une cartographie fictionnelle des espaces humains. C'est ensuite qu'elle permet de situer l'œuvre en perspective d'un référent spatial plus ou moins largement exploité par ailleurs. En cela, elle est susceptible d'apporter de précieuses informations dans un contexte monographique<sup>2</sup>.

When taking into account the artistic skills of Alfred Mansfeld as a writer and narrator in his story, one can easily say that he is a writer of a special kind. The representation mode of the reference space that is Cameroon is based on a plurality of disciplines that allow the traveler to construct the space traveled through various sources of

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<sup>1</sup>In the following, I will use the acronym UK for *Urwald-Dokumente: Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns* followed by the page number for references.

<sup>2</sup>Bertrand, Westphal. « Pour une approche critique des textes : Esquisse ». [http://www.vox-poetica.org/sflgc/biblio/gcr.html#\\_ftnref46](http://www.vox-poetica.org/sflgc/biblio/gcr.html#_ftnref46), consulted on the 29<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

knowledge. The narrator uses history, geography and anthropology in order to provide the reader with information about Cameroon. The story begins with a presentation of Ossidinge, imperial station and capital of one of the prefectures of the German colony of Cameroon, on the border with Nigeria. Based on the etymology, the narrator draws up the birth certificate of this colony. He reports:

Ossidinge oder Oschi-dinge bedeutet Fischplatz; Oschi = „Fisch“, dinge = „viel“. Der Name wurde von den Eingeborenen nur auf einen Uferplatz am Crossfluß angewandt; eine Niederlassung gleichen Namens hat nie existiert. Es befand sich früher an der Stelle, an der die heutige Station liegt, ein Abokumdorf, welches sich später mit dem 1 km weiter stromauf gelegenen zweiten Dorfe vereinigte. Ältere Leute der südlich des Crossflusses gelegenen Landschaften reden auch heute noch von „Abokum“, wenn sie zur Station gehen wollen. (UK: 22)

Further, the narrator does not just describe landscapes and places. In the manner of a topographer, better than a surveyor, he manages to provide the reader with accurate references to the distances between rivers, mountains and territories near Ossidinge. From its description, cartography of the colonial district is progressively taking form. To achieve this, he proceeds with rhetorical questions of which he gives answers on the geographical contours of the colonial space.

Wie sieht das Land aus? Der ganze Bezirk ist ein Hügelland, in welchem es kaum eine 10 km lange ebene Strecke gibt. Während er längs der Nord- und Südgrenze von 1300 m hohen Gebirgsketten eingerahmt ist, finden sich an der Ostgrenze und im ganzen Inneren nur immer einzelne Berggruppen sowie einzelne Kegel von 100 — 500 m Höhe in die hügelige Ebene eingestreut (UK: 26).

Geology is of particular interest to the traveler-character. He indicates that the colonial district is hilly. The elevations north and south of the district reach a height of 1200 to 1300 m. On the other hand, the reader learns that part of the district was geologically explored in 1906 and that the report was published in the supplement to Colonial Journal No. 1 of 1908. As an anthropologist and geographer, the character wants to be close reality to be able to examine and describe it in detail. He must proceed systematically to ensure the clarity of his statements. So, he examines the soil, the vegetation, the climate, the water and shows exactly how these natural elements interact. As if to reveal the logic that governs his action, the narrator recalls to what ends served the results of his expedition on soil exploration in Esundan:

„Die Tafeln, die ich im Dezember 1904 auf einer Dienstreise in Esudan (Bakogo-Landschaft) fand, sind auf der Bergakademie in Berlin geprüft und sehr günstig beurteilt worden. Interessant ist das Vorhandensein von Salzquellen; sie liegen von Westen nach Osten“ (UK: 45).

In an article entitled "*The image of Cameroon in German colonial literature*", Max F. Dippold (1973) is interested in different forms of perceptions of the Germans in contact with Cameroon. It shows that the first image that has been created in the German mind by Equatorial and Central Africa is that of the "virgin forest": "der Urwald". This term contains much more than just the botanical notion of primary forest. This concept:

est d'une importance capitale pour l'image du Cameroun, et une description de la forêt constitue le morceau de résistance de presque tous les livres sur ce pays. Le genre varie de la simple description à l'envolée lyrique (Max F. Dippold, 1973 : 37).

In a general way, we can say that Africa has been inscribed in the European imagination in an exoticism generating images that were crystallized in the collective mentality. In this imaginary, nature occupies a place of choice. The striking feature of the Cameroonian landscape, which holds the traveler's attention, is the incredible abundance of vegetation. This nature belongs to the world of origins. This experience of the world of origins that the German seeks can only give him pleasure. The strangeness of nature becomes for the narrator a "*locus amoenus*", an idyllic place. For the narrator, a first foray

into the virgin forest gives an unforgettable impression. The abundance of the vegetable kingdom and all its greenery can be discovered. The traveler reports:

Im Gegensatz zur Wüste ist der Urwald im Ossidinge grün, dank eines besonderen Klimas. Es sind in dieser Gegend zwei Jahreszeiten zu unterscheiden: eine kurze Trockenzeit und eine sehr lange Regenzeit (9 Monate). So können alle Pflanzen ihre Blätter stets grün halten. Es ist ein Spielraum für ein natürliches, spektakuläres Theaterspiel zwischen den Wolken und den Winden (UK:75).

Further, the character draws a picturesque panorama that from the sea makes visible Mount Cameroon. From the sea, one not only observes the distant, but one manages to have a global view:

Phantastische Bilder folgen, sobald man in einem der Häfen an Land geht; das leuchtende Rot des Bodens, das unbeschreiblich satte Blau weiter Gewänder auf dunklen, bronzefarbenen Gestalten brennen sich förmlich in den Augen ein (UK: 76).

From there to say that the description of nature reflects an exoticism, there is only one step to take. Exoticism, "self-denial, capture and seizure of the Other and abandonment of one's own landmarks" (Victor Segalen, 1978: 38) makes visible the "structures of attitudes and references", that is to say:

*L'émergence dans les discours culturels de la littérature, de l'histoire et de l'ethnographie d'un ensemble structuré de localisations et de références géographiques, que l'on retrouve, parfois, allusives, parfois savamment mises en scène, dans des œuvres très diverses qui ne sont pas liées entre elles ni à une idéologie officielle de l'empire* (Edward Saïd, 2000 : 89).

If we admit that the image according to Daniel-Henri Pageaux is: « la représentation d'une réalité culturelle au travers de laquelle l'individu ou le groupe qui l'ont élaborée (ou qui la partagent ou qui la propagent) révèlent et traduisent l'espace culturel et idéologique dans lequel ils se situent » (Daniel-Henri Pageaux, 1989 : 145), we must, in the following, see how the traveler's gaze on the Elsewhere makes it possible to disentangle his relation to the Other, to otherness.

### III- Travel writing and intercultural relations: the case of Alfred Mansfeld.

As object of literary study, travel is at the crossroads of cultural history and intercultural studies, but also the analysis of commonplaces and stereotypes. In the field of intercultural studies precisely, what is at stake, even what is at stake in the discovery of the Other produced by travel literature, is the construction of an inseparable imaginary of geographical spaces and cultural in contact. In the case of Africa and Europe, travel stories from missionaries, explorers or colonial administrators, as well as works by writers, illustrate those contacts. Works of literary imagology generally present a Europe that develops various reactions to the Other. Overall, the colonial vision of exoticism is reduced to topographic features, flora or fauna, and highlights the cultural difference of alterity as a source of rejection. In the context of cultures in contact, the figure of the exotic-traveler illuminates in a different way the colonial encounter by suppressing the imperial dimension and the ethnocentric look of the Western discourse to propose respect for difference and opacity of cultures. This is what Victor Segalen claims. His "*Essai sur l'exotisme*" puts forward the theme of diversity which results from the consideration for the Other as such. Indeed, for Segalen, the notion of diversity refers to the concepts of difference and otherness, not in the sense of opposition, but rather as enrichment.

In the case of Alfred Mansfeld's travel narrative, the intercultural relationship takes a variety of configurations, the most important of which are from the encounter to the representation of the Other in its difference. For the physics of the people encountered, the narrator is satisfied with the description of the somatic traits. The beauty of the black race is exalted by Alfred Mansfeld for the Banes, Fulbes and Bororo. By similarity, the narrator indicates that these people have an almost Caucasian face and that some Fulbe have a face reminiscent of classical statues. The encounter of the Other, better the discovery of the

"New World" is devoid of all forms of Eurocentric perception. The color of the skin, a fundamental criterion of colonial ideology, is of course the most visible difference, but the traveler ends up accepting its relativity. On the other hand, when there is physical contact, the aversion crystallizes:

Trotz aller Sympathie für die Schwarzen habe ich mir daran gewöhnt - die Idee, dass Schwarze unser Essen zubereiten. Solange ich zu Freunden eingeladen war, gehöre ich nicht zu unseren Gästen Ich koche es Jetzt sah ich schwarze Finger in unserem Essen, und das musste ich überwinden (UK: 114).

Unanimity reigns in the appreciation of the strength, flexibility and plastic perfection of black bodies:

Die Statur der Eingeborenen ist wunderschön und oft perfekt. Der Anteil gut gemachter Menschen ist erheblich höher als zu Hause. Auch ihre Ausdauer verdient Bewunderung. Zur Unterstützung von Hunger, Durst und Müdigkeit haben sie keine Rivalen. In der Zwischenzeit können sie uns durch körperliche Kraft und Geschicklichkeit, die normale Entwicklung ihres Körpers und die Kraft ihrer Konstitution überlegen sein (UK:146)

If it is true that the colonial novel is a place where the experience of contact between Africa and Europe is inscribed, and from which the colonial discourse is expressed, it is clear that the movement towards the Other, under the sign of the travel, does not mean any development of its cultural deficit. On the contrary, the Other is considered as the counterpart of the Self. As a result, openness to the Other is then combined with self-discovery. The craftsmanship, the architecture and the negotiation diplomacy of the Ossidinge peoples, as well as the dances of a certain rhythm, attract the attention of the author. In his narration, he devotes several chapters to these cultural aspects. The people of Ossidinge are good craftsmen and artists:

Die Leute wohnen nicht in geschlossenen Ortschaften wie die Waldlandneger, sondern nach der Weise des Graslandes hat jeder Mann sich sein Gehöft, das aus dem größeren Männerhaus und mehreren kleinen Weiberhäusern besteht, einzeln und abgesondert von den anderen gebaut. Alle Häuser zeigen quadratischen Grundriß; die aus Palm-rippen zusammengebundenen Wände sind ganz und gar mit dem roten Laterit beworfen. Meist sind sie höher als breit, und die Tür, die einzige Öffnung des Hauses, ist etwa ½ m über den Boden angebracht. Einzelne Häuser sind winzig; es gibt solche von 2 m im Ge-viert, die Tür darin ist dann nur 1 m hoch und ½ m breit. Bei allen ist das Dach hoch und spitz, ringsum weit vorspringend, gedeckt mit schweren Grasmassen (UK:245).

Alfred Mansfeld has particular sympathy for the local authorities. He is particularly impressed by their sense of power and describes it thoroughly. His attention is focused on the Ossidinge leader:

Als Häuptling soll er sehr tüchtig sein, und sicher macht er einen intelligenteren Eindruck als die meisten anderen Neger; eine gewisse Gier auf unsere Kulturerzeugnisse ist bei seiner kurzen Bekanntschaft mit allem europäischen wohl begreiflich (UK: 176).

As can be seen, the categories of description that the narrator uses to represent the Cameroonian people are counterpoint to the social discourse and doxa of the colonial context. The traveler gets away from "the imagination of the empire" to fit in what Jean-Marc Moura calls "the empire of the imagination" that is to say that:

*Le texte [colonial] est [ici] le véhicule, le signe, le narrateur de l'autorité impériale. Il s'agit d'un ensemble dont la vocation est de déchiffrer des espaces étrangers et qui transfère à cet effet des métaphores, des concepts, de notions familières dans des contextes déstabilisants, parce que différents. L'étrangeté des pays colonisés est ainsi rendu accessible par l'usage de conventions d'écriture à la fois rhétorique, syntaxique et formels (Moura, 2008).*

### Concluding remarks

Throughout this contribution, it was questioned to show, through the travel account of Alfred Mansfeld, how from several references, the narrator-character manages to build knowledge about Cameroon. In addition, an intercultural reading made it clear that the German traveler does not establish any hierarchy between cultures. The imperialist

message and the legitimization of colonization, at work in the narrative structure of colonial novels, are undermined by an exoticism all the more significant that Cameroon becomes an outlet, an idyllic place for the traveler. The Elsewhere as an exotic object, let us remember, has often been well confused with the colony. As a result, the travelogue of the German writer, an exotic literary genre often worked by the concepts of ethnocentrism, cultural hegemony and overhanging gaze, seems to be a vector of interculturality in a colonial situation. Starting from "Urwald-Dokumente: Vier Jahre unter den Crossflussnegern Kameruns", we see that the travel text opens the possibility of thinking otherness and difference differently than in terms of opposing dichotomies, or in terms of reductive metonymies of the Other. The travel story represents both singularity and novelty. From this point of view, analyzing the travel narrative by taking a distance from a hegemonic interpretation of the West on Africa makes it possible to go beyond the inscription of this kind in the colonial matrix.

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