

Producing the 'Other'

Colonial Stereotypes in Everyday Life

When we think of the 'Third World', pictures of chaos, misery and starving children come into our minds and current political events seem to confirm all negative clichés. Especially Africa still stands for underdevelopment and poverty and often acts as prime example for the 'Third World'.¹ Civil wars, refugees, child soldiers, famines and diseases are all keywords that suggest that decolonisation has failed and which deem Africa unfit for 'civilisation'. Racial prejudice and stereotypical thinking are hence deeply rooted in our collective imagination.

Africa in our classroom

"Should we read *Heart of Darkness*?" asks J. Hillis Miller about a novel, that has been on the syllabi of Luxembourg's 1ère A for many years.² *Heart of Darkness*, a novel written by Joseph Conrad in 1899, describes the company agent Marlow's journey inside the Belgian Congo, a journey in search of the agent Kurtz who has been sent on a civilising mission by a Belgian trading company. However, it is not only the story of the idealist Kurtz, who has gone native and abandoned all moral values, but *Heart of Darkness* also intends to expose the actual situation in the colony – a reality that has nothing to do with the colonial image as presented in propaganda and public discourse back in Europe. The novel, that draws on Joseph Conrad's own experience is still highly discussed among scholars. In 1975, Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe was the first to address the question of racism in the novel, calling its writer a 'bloody nigger' for his depictions of the Africans.³

He concluded that Europeans are still not sensitised to racism against other cultures because if they were, the novel would not be considered one of the best novels in English history. On the contrary, it would be struck from syllabi. In Luxembourg, it has been on the syllabi of 1ère A classes until 2010 and I have studied the novel in school.⁴ Yet while many aspects of this controversial book have been discussed, the question of European self-portrayal through the construction of the Other has not been raised. Neither has Luxembourg's colonial past been addressed even though Luxembourg has played its part in the colonisation of the Congo.⁵ This experience seems to confirm Chinua's assertion that we are still unaware of the fact that Africa has been and remains to be set up as an "antithesis to Europe and therefore civilisation..."⁶

Achebe's assumption can be further confirmed, if we look at the texts currently treated in primary school. Here, equally problematic texts can be found on the syllabi. The German schoolbook for the 3rd grade for example contains the story "Afrika hinter dem Zaun", a story about an African woman who builds a mud hut in the garden of a town house. Already the title suggests that Africa is incorporated in a single mud hut. The text reproduces several clichés about the continent: While the other, 'European', families are pragmatic and plant cauliflower in their garden, the African woman plants grass, simply 'to have a look at it'. Her African dialect is not even named ("Was sie sprach wussten wir nicht. Irgendwas"). She appears to be at one with nature and even have some command over it ("Als wartete sie auf sehr viel Regen. Und dann bekamen wir sehr viel Regen.") and finally, she seems to be more fond of living in a mud hut than in a 'conventional' house, the hut reminding her of Africa and her childhood. The descriptions in the text are highly problematic

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The Colonies were generally perceived as an empty space that could legally be appropriated, partly industrialized and its inhabitants converted to Christianity and loyal workers. Accounts on distant regions and indigenous peoples were always caricatural and acted as counterparts to the European identity. And the more uncivilised the Africans were envisioned, the more the noble, heroic White stood out in contrast: "Europe's light shone brighter by virtue of the darkening of other continents."¹² The Continent was presented by the colonisers, as a 'terra nullius', as an empty, uncultivated land, rightfully available to colonialism. A place where the Europeans could provide the less developed people evolutionary assistance.¹³ In colonial and racial discourse, knowledge about prehistory was used in order to stress the backwardness of other cultures and thereby served to explain their primitiveness and inferiority. Even though the so-called primitive people had a long history of innovations, this was neglected by equating them with prehistoric societies.¹⁴

And these were images instrumentalised for political domination and economic gain. For this purpose they were propagated everywhere: in newspapers, literature and exhibitions as well as in advertisement. Hence the imperialist ideology was accepted among the Western public sphere and populations. When consumerism and colonialism were on the rise, fantasies of adventure and exotic settings were even used to create new popularized and commercially used images of the Other and led to the emergence of pejorative and stereotypical images in advertisement and shop windows all over Europe.¹⁵



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Yet, the examples I have used show that this trend does still persist. Africa is depicted in terms of stereotypes. Postcolonial theorist Edward Said rightfully claims that far from being questioned and deconstructed, these stereotypes are being reinforced even today.¹⁶ In his works *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward Said claims that imperialism has shaped all 19th century cultures and all European relations and exchanges between colonisers and colonised. He further argues that imperial discourse of knowledge and power did not only guarantee economic and political control over the colonised but that it also influenced the way, the colonised saw and still see themselves – as subordinate to Europe. Hence, "all postcolonial societies are still subject in one way or another to overt or subtle forms of neo-colonial domination".¹⁷

This article has shown that Africa is still painted as 'the other world', as an antithesis to Europe, progress and civilisation. The African continent is assimilated to 'nature' and conceptualized as an ahistoric

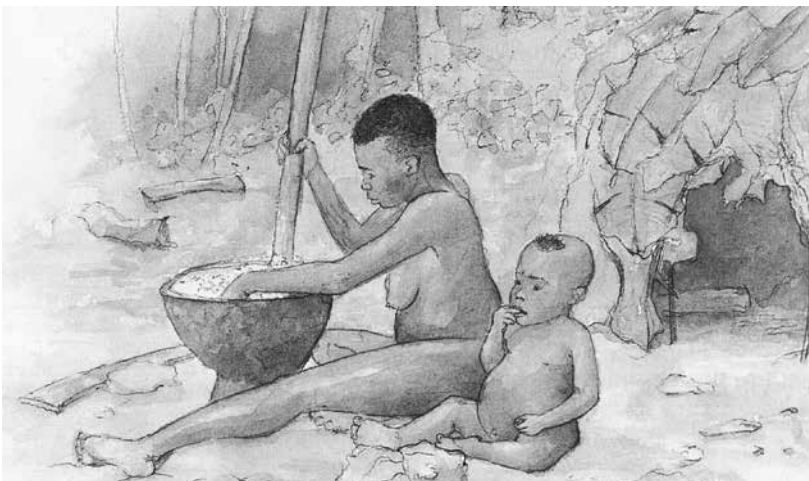
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○ Les **Pygmées** vivent comme il y a des milliers d'années de chasse et de cueillette dans la forêt équatoriale, dont ils connaissent tous les secrets.

place. Especially the examples taken from children's education are highly caricatured and therefore problematic. These images and texts are used to give the children a first understanding of the world, of other continents and different cultures. Yet, they clearly show how deep stereotypical representations are rooted in our collective mind and disseminated over and over again. Even if pedagogical material starts to focus on 'multicultural' children's literature, it should be regarded sceptically, because it does not necessarily engage with cultural difference and critically address questions of race, ethnicity and colonialism.¹⁸ Stereotypical, degrading and even racist representations are still accepted and consumed by a broad public and a questioning of such images apparently still needs to take place. The myth of European superiority as well as Western images of other cultures still need to be deconstructed as the persistence of such constructed images and implicit racist thinking remain a source of dominance. Discourse about 'Third World' countries remains a discourse that reproduces relations of power, setting other cultures up as 'the Other' and presenting them as under-developed in terms of progress and civilisation. The desire for domination and subordination continues to influence all exchanges and relations with the 'South'. The West is continuously used as a scale to which the 'less-developed' countries shall appeal, concepts of modernity and progress being constantly associated with Western lifestyle. 'Third World' countries are thereby presented as incapable of organising themselves.¹⁹ Even the term of 'under-development', associated with poverty, suggests the need of assistance by the more progressed and modern societies, yet progress is only evaluated in terms of economic achievement and prospect.²⁰ ♦

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1 I am aware that the usage of the term 'Third World' is contested, yet as it remains prominent in daily use, and is therefore used here for the sake of my argumentation.

2 MILLER Hillis, Should we read Heart of Darkness? in: ARMSTRONG Paul (ed.), *Heart of Darkness. A Norton Critical Edition*. New York 2006. pp.463-473.

3 cf: ACHEBE Chinua, An Image of Africa: Racism in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness in: *ACHEBE Chinua, Hopes and Impediments. Selected Essays*- New York 1989. pp.3-15.

4 The book has been taken off the programme after a voting by the CNP (Conseil National des Programmes), as they felt that it was time for a change on the syllabi. It is still studied in some 2e A classes though.

5 cf: MOES Regis, *Cette colonie qui nous appartient un peu: la communauté luxembourgeoise au Congo belge: 1883-1960*. Luxembourg 2012.

6 ACHEBE, *An Image of Africa*. p.13

7 cf: ARENDT Hannah, *Imperialism. Part Two of the Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York 1968. p.72: Africa and Africans were different because "they behaved like a part of nature, that they had treated nature as their undisputed master, that they had not created a human world, a human reality, and that therefore nature had remained, in all its majesty, the overwhelming reality."

8 MOEYAERT Bart, HÖGLUND Anna, Afrika hinter dem Zaun in: EDUCATION NATIONALE, LUXEMBOURG (ed.), *Dschumanji Band 2*. Lesebuch für das 3. Schuljahr. Luxembourg 2006. pp.48-49.

9 cf: MILAN (ed.), *Amuse-toi autour du monde. L'atlas des 5-8 ans*. Toulouse 2013; USBORNE (ed.), *Mein bunter Weltatlas*. London 2013; MORRIS Neil, *Children's Picture Atlas*. London. 2009.

10 cf: nach De Foy Filippart, *Chez les génies de la forêt: Waldnomaden* in: EDUCATION NATIONALE, LUXEMBOURG (ed.), *Dschumanji Band 1*. Lesebuch für das 3. Schuljahr. Luxembourg 2006. pp. 54-55.

11 For a more in depth articulation of the historical background, cf: GRAVES L. Joseph Jr., *The Emperor's New Clothes. Biological Theories of Race at the Millennium*. New Jersey 2008; MAYER Michael, „Tropen gibt es nicht.“ Dekonstruktionen des Exotismus. Bielefeld 2010; OSTERHAMMEL Jürgen, *Kolonialismus. Geschichte-Formen-Folgen*. Munich 2003; PATOU-MATHIS Marilène, *Le Sauvage et le Préhistorique, miroir de l'Homme occidental. De la malédiction de Cham à l'identité nationale*. Paris 2011.

12 PIETERSE Nederveen Jan, *White on Black. Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture*. Amsterdam 1992. p.75.

13 Compare : PIETERSE, *White on Black*. p.35.

14 cf: PATOU-MATHIS, *Le Sauvage et le Préhistorique, miroir de l'Homme occidental*. p.97.

15 WOLTER Stephanie, *Die Vermarktung des Fremden. Exotismus und die Anfänge des Massenkonsums*. Frankfurt a. M. 2005. p.9

16 SAID W. Edward, *Orientalism*. New York 1978. p.26.

17 ASHCROFT, GRIFFITHS, TIFFIN (eds.), *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*. New York 2006. pp.1-2.

18 RUDD David (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Children's Literature*. Abingdon 2010. pp.39-50.

19 Cf : GOUDGE Paulette, *The Whiteness of Power. Racism in Third World Development and Aid*. London 2003. p.38: Development is a Northern imposition.

20 For instance, the very concept of development needs to be interrogated and re-evaluated. Is it one road, leading into the right direction?