Dualla Misipo

The Boy from Douala. A Government School Student Tells his Story...

Der Junge aus Duala. Ein Regierungsschüler erzählt…

Presented by: Sandra Folie

Der Junge aus Duala (*The Boy from Douala*) is the only novel by the Cameroonian-German-French writer Dualla Misipo (1901–1973) and his second book. He likely began working on it in the late 1920s and continued revising it until its publication in 1973. It is considered one of the earliest German-language works of postcolonial literature and can also be read as an early Afropean political novel that critically engages with German colonialism and its afterlives. The novel follows Ekwe Njembele, a Cameroonian boy born in Douala under German colonial rule, who, after attending the German government school there, continues his education in Germany. Its central themes include colonial power structures, anti-Black racism, cultural hybridity, and Ekwe's romantic relationship with a *white* German woman.

The novel consists of nine chapters interspersed with fifteen drawings by the author. It opens with a scene narrated from an omniscient perspective, describing the atmosphere before an athletics competition in a town in the German state of Hessen: the venue, the spectators, and the athletes. The narrator then zooms in and shifts the focus to the only Black athlete, who unexpectedly takes the floor: "The Black man is me." (*Der Schwarze bin ich*.). The figure previously observed from a distance thus reveals himself as the voice shaping the narrative. With this move, the "I" asserts itself as the subject of its own story and claims narrative agency.

By identifying himself as Ekwe Njembele, the autodiegetic narrator complicates a straightforward autobiographical reading. Although many of the novel's characters, settings, and events overlap with the author's biography, they are consistently reshaped. In constructing his narrator, Misipo engages in a form of "autofictional self-fashioning" (Folie/Zocco, 95), presenting his protagonist as a record-breaking runner, an ambitious medical student, and an accomplished musician. These roles reflect interests and abilities Misipo himself possessed but was unable to pursue with the same consistency and success.

The framing narrative can be situated in the Weimar Republic. In a series of embedded narratives, Njembele recalls his childhood in Douala, then under German colonial rule, as well as his arrival in Germany at around the age of ten and his upbringing with foster parents in a small Hessian town. These flashbacks, mostly prompted by questions from *white* German characters, do not follow a strict chronology. By contrast, the framing narrative unfolds chronologically, tracing his romantic relationship with the *white* German Marianne from their first meeting after the sports competition to their engagement.

Although Njembele is the primary narrator, at least two additional narrative instances can be discerned. One is his grandmother, who leads a traditional Cameroonian life. She recounts to her grandson the folktales and legends of the Duala, which he later, as an adult, retells to Marianne and other German acquaintances. The figure of the older, wise woman thus emerges as a mediator of oral tradition and a symbolic embodiment of cultural memory, comparable both to the Brothers Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* and to contemporary Afropean novels such as Max Lobe's *Confidences* (2016) and Mirrianne Mahn's *Issa* (2024).

A second, more elusive narrative instance emerges in essayistic digressions, in which the narrated time seems to stand still and the speaking position remains unclear. For example, at the beginning of the second chapter, the apartheid system in South Africa is compared with segregationist measures in the southern United States and in European colonial contexts. This explicitly political voice extends beyond the novel's primary temporal frame of the 1900s–1920s, introducing a discursive layer that intervenes in transnational debates on race and colonialism well into the second half of the twentieth century.

The narrated space of *Der Junge aus Duala* is characterized by geographical diversity and transnationality, frequent scenes of mobility, and overlapping experiences of belonging and exclusion. Ekwe Njembele's memories of Douala are deeply ambivalent: while he condemns the ignorance and brutal violence of his German teachers (and the colonial forces more generally), he nevertheless values the education received at the German government school. He likewise describes Germany both as a "foreign land" (*Fremde*) and as his second "home" (*Heimat*): a place of intimacy and opportunity, yet also one marked by deeply ingrained racism.

The novel displays a striking sensitivity to racist language. While Misipo does spell out derogatory racial terms such as the N-word, he never uses them as 'neutral' forms of self- or group designation. Instead, they appear exclusively in direct quotations or paraphrases that reproduce the verbal violence to which his narrator is subjected. Misipo also incorporates analytical passages that reflect on such terms. In these sections, the narrator describes the N-word as a term many Africans encounter for the first time during their stay in Europe, emphasizing that it functions as a "formula" that denotes "no human being", but rather "an object of care or a social burden".

Although the relation between the novel's Cameroonian and German locations seems to follow the center-periphery model of power imbalance described in postcolonial theory, it does not reproduce a stable dichotomy but instead unsettles colonial spatial hierarchies. The 'periphery,' which would be associated with Cameroon according to the model of an empire that 'writes back,' appears primarily through the urban port city of Douala, shaped by multilingualism and Europeanization. By contrast, the supposed 'center' initially takes the form of a provincial Hessian town whose inhabitants speak a local German dialect that is at first incomprehensible to the protagonist, despite his fluency in German.

A similar logic of reversal structures the novel's use of intertextuality. The narrator demonstrates his mastery of "the colonizers' canons" (Lennox, 72), alluding to authors ranging from Sophocles and Caesar to Hugo, Goethe, and Schiller without explicitly naming them. In doing so, he invites readers to test their own erudition and thus subtly complicates established hierarchies of knowledge and authority between (former) colonizer and colonized.

While Ekwe Njembele's story ostensibly foregrounds postcolonial success and intercultural reconciliation, his extremely diligent and ambitious behaviour also reflects the pressures of conforming to the normative model of the overassimilative 'good immigrant.' Experiences of

suffering and alienation are articulated more indirectly, for instance through parallels with animal figures, such as a young parrot taken from Cameroon to Germany as a gift, or through the discrimination Marianne faces because of her relationship with Ekwe.

Der Junge aus Duala has been described as the first novel by a Black German author (Dangarembga, 22) and as one of the earliest postcolonial works in German (Göttsche, 313–314). Given its transnational scope, however, it also belongs to an Afropean canon. It shares with contemporary Afropean writers such as Max Lobe, Mirrianne Mahn, Sharon Dodua Otoo, and Mohamed Mbougar Sarr an "Afropean aesthetics" (Oholi) that articulates plural Black identities and challenges essentialist notions of both Africa and Europe. The novel also anticipates key thematic concerns of more recent Afropean writing, including its "stunning analysis of European racism and the psyche of the colonized subject" (Koepsell, 41).

Despite its relevance to current debates, the novel has long remained overlooked by both scholarship and the wider public. This is partly due to its publication history (Folie/Zocco, 89–93): although Misipo dated an initial version to 1932, the first verifiable publication of the novel appeared only in 1973, when Kraus Reprint published a typescript that was primarily intended for academic libraries. A new edition, edited by Jürg Schneider, was published in 2022; however, following the unexpected death of the publisher Rüdiger Köppe in 2024, it is currently no longer available in bookstores. Nevertheless, it can still be borrowed from some larger libraries, especially in the German-speaking world.

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