

Autobiographik in Afrika: Literaturgeschichte und Genrevielfalt.

Susanne Gehrmann.

Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2021. 244 pp.
ISBN 978-3-86821-925-8.

The academic series *Literatures and Arts of Africa* seeks to demonstrate “the relevance of Africa’s cultural production for contemporary theories and debates” and Susanne Gehrmann’s recent contribution undoubtedly contributes to this endeavour. The German Africanist investigates the broad variety of autobiographical discourses in sub-Saharan Africa from literary historical and genre theoretical perspectives. Proving her extensive expertise in anglo- and francophone African literatures and cultures, the author traces the African autobiographical continuum from the pre-colonial past to the post-postcolonial present. More than an overview, Gehrmann’s highly informative monograph deconstructs Eurocentric perspectives on the genre category: redefining autobiographies as autobiographics, she emphasises the capacity of self-referential life narratives (which include slave narratives as well as prison literature) to oscillate between oral and written forms, factual and fictional elements, individual and community interests. The continuum unfolds in five chapters and, although evoking a Eurocentric conception of time, their chronological arrangement not only renders the study a comprehensive work of reference; moreover, it serves to illustrate that pre-colonial, colonial and postcolonial autobiographics, their distinct forms and functions, emerge from ever-shifting structures of power. Additionally, the research design functions to elucidate structural continuities and intertextual references across the centuries; accordingly, Olaudah Equiano’s *Interesting Narrative* (1789) appears as a precursor of contemporary testimonies by child soldiers or LGBTQ+ activists, while the mention of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s critical essay *Decolonising the Mind* (1968) in Binyavanga Wainaina’s *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (2011) suggests that, in the post-postcolonial era, intellectual activism gives way to middle-class comfort.

Indeed, focusing on pre-colonial oral forms, the first chapter establishes a system of references which clarifies that self-referential literary discourses in sub-Saharan Africa cannot be reduced to European influences. Encompassing the subject’s genealogical investigations or the use of fairy tales, myths and proverbs, oral autobiographical features show a remarkable resilience, pervading Amadou Hampâté Bâ’s *Amkoullel, l’enfant peul* (1991) and *Oui mon commandant!*

(1992) just as much as Frances Baard’s *My Spirit is Not Banned* (1986) which relates the imprisonment of the ANC Women’s League representative in the 1960s. Similarly, pre-colonial written forms did not exclusively develop out of the transatlantic economy. Preceding the discussion of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave narratives in the third sub-chapter, Gehrmann points to various religious and historiographic texts which, written in Arabic and Ajami (an umbrella term for African languages written in the Arabic alphabet) by male Islam scholars in West, Central and Northeast Africa, frequently include accounts of the writers’ conversions and other spiritual experiences, such as the seventeenth-century historiography *Ta’rikh al-Sudan* by the Timbuktu scholar Abd al-Sa’di.

Moving to the twentieth century, the second chapter scrutinises how the colonial powers consolidated their superiority via the import of languages and forms of literary expression. Heavily influenced by colonial memoirs and travelogues, the first African life narratives in European languages served to devise the disciplines of anthropology and ethnology and thereby strengthened colonial power. The extent to which colonialists regulated African autobiographical production is exemplified by Daniel Mtusu’s *The Autobiography of an African* which, originally written in the Malawian pastor’s mother tongue Chingoni, was translated, expanded and edited by the missionary Donald Fraser in 1925 so as to fit the colonial taste of the British reading public ‘at home’—a practice that, as chapter three indicates, continues in the circulation patterns of recent child soldier narratives and other testimonies in human rights contexts like Waris Dirie’s *Desert Flower* (1998) that, registering the traumas of female circumcision, was co-authored by the American writer Cathleen Miller and distributed by the US publisher William Morrow. Challenging one-dimensional conceptions of power, however, Gehrmann convincingly contends that this and other early twentieth century auto-ethnographic texts equally imitate the kind of colonial ideology that distinguishes 1930s popular anthologies like Margery Perham’s *Ten Africans: A Collection of Life Stories* (1936). On the other hand, and as the third sub-chapter highlights, the prose autobiographics of Francisco José Mopila (*Memorias de un Congolés*, 1949) or Camara Laye (*L’enfant noir*, 1953) who, in the mid-century, travelled to Europe as a means of training to become part of a male colonial elite, herald an increasing hybridisation of African and European autobiographical forms. Appropriating the *l’enfant noir* short biographies of colonial teachers, Laye’s text, in particular, stresses the

potentially subversive and self-affirmative functions of self-referential African writing which turn into a central characteristic of the postcolonial era.

The scope of postcolonial autobiographical forms is underlined by the longest third chapter of Gehrman's study. Resistant writing practices, which undermine Western canon formations or criticise colonial legacies, inform the autobiographical novels of the Nigerian Wole Soyinka (*Aké: The Years of Childhood*, 1981) or the Senegalese Cheikh Kane (*L'Aventure ambiguë*, 1961) and the autobiographical essays by the Malian Manthia Diawara (*In Search of Africa*, 1998) or the Congolese V. Y. Mudimbe (*Les corps glorieux des mots et des êtres*, 1994) alike. In contrast with political memoirs, which construct linear narratives of heroic masculinity, these essays blend self-referential and theoretical elements and, as a result of their formal hybridity, envision identity formation as an ongoing process. A similar observation applies to the serial autobiographical narratives by the Nigerian Buchi Emecheta or the Senegalese Ken Bugul (Mariétou Mbaye Biléoma) which, contrary to the colonial childhood memoirs of Soyinka or Kane, do not seek to reconcile the culturally fragmented subject but rather mix autobiographical and fictional modes to negotiate hybrid femininities in colonial and local patriarchal settings. Against this backdrop, and as the fourth chapter (which testifies to the series' combination of literary, art and media studies approaches) shows, it is hardly a coincidence that Mudimbe's essay and Bugul's autobiographical trilogy (*Le Baobab fou*, 1982; *Cendres et braises*, 1994; *Riwan, ou, Le chemin de sable*, 1999) expanded into photography and a road movie (*Ken Bugul: Personne n'en veut*, dir. Silvia Voser, 2013), using different media to further hybridise their autobiographics.

Closing with a discussion of Wainaina's text in the fifth chapter, Gehrman's study merely touches upon twenty-first-century African diasporic writers and the self-promotional practices with which they expand the autobiographical continuum. A closer consideration of the current global and increasingly digitised book market would have been beneficial to interrogate the merits and demerits of a term like 'post-postcolonial' and examine the material conditions of contemporary African autobiographics. Irrespective of these minor criticisms, this rich study can only be recommended. Without doubt, readers with an interest in the continuity of and changes in anglo- and francophone African autobiographical production will appreciate Gehrman's solid textual analyses in their respective historical contexts.

Hannah Pardey

hannah.pardey@engsem.uni-hannover.de

Leibniz University Hanover

Hanover, Germany

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8855-4985>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v59i2.14246>