
Robbie Aitken’s *Exclusion and Inclusion: Gradations of Whiteness and Socio-Economic Engineering in German Southwest Africa, 1884-1914* is a study of the inherent instability of supposedly unchanging racial categories. Drawing on the theoretical framework of scholars such as Ann Laura Stoler, Aitken convincingly argues that in German South West Africa, the term ‘white’ had no conceptual fixity, and was instead historically contingent on a variety of factors. While Aitken is less explicit in his discussion of the category ‘black’ than he is with ‘white’, his analysis makes it clear that both were unsettled by the constant definition and redefinition of racial belongingness. Stoler has suggested that the presence of poor whites and mixed race individuals in the Dutch East Indies upset the delicate racial and sexual order that Europeans tried so hard to cultivate in their colonies; Aitken proposes much the same for South West Africa, where the idealised upper-class, white colony German officials imagined never materialised, forcing them to deal with a much different settler population than the one they had envisaged.

Aitken begins his book by introducing the reader to the specific context of German South West Africa, and providing a review of the theoretical and historiographical literature. Besides Stoler, Aitken uses postcolonial models advanced by Robert Young, Homi Bhabha, Nicholas Thomas, and Aihwa Ong. For instance, he employs Bhabha’s argument that in Europe’s colonies, difference was deployed as a marker of power to set apart coloniser and colonised, albeit one that never did so in the neat, orderly manner that the colonisers predicted. Nonetheless, in South West Africa, as elsewhere, difference would be enshrined both in legal codes as well as in what Aitken refers to as discursive practice: In essence that set of stereotypes and preconceived notions that Europeans had about ideas such as ‘Germanness’ and whiteness. Following Bhabha, Aitken also contends that ‘white’ was not fundamentally a biological category, but a social one determined less by genetic heritage than by comportment and behaviour.

Aitken shows that originally, the ideal German settler and his white identity were defined by both financial security and upper class morality. Mid- to late nineteenth century colonial fantasies revolved around the person of the wealthy, urbane farmer who would economically and morally develop South West Africa into a German utopia. Treading ground covered somewhat differently by Lora Wildenthal, Birthe Kundrus and Daniel Walther, Aitken maintains that Germans believed industrialisation and urbanisation had destroyed their country’s own premodern utopia, and that their pure, rural past could only be recovered on colonial terrain with the help of rugged, self-sufficient and hard-working men, embodied by the ideal farmer. There were also more practical reasons to promote overseas colonisation: Germans were immigrating abroad, particularly to
the United States, at a high rate. To halt the flow of emigration and the deterioration of German identity it represented, politicians recommended that Germans be directed to settle within their own empire.

The ideal upper class settlers who might have developed the colonies into industrious mini-Germanies were, however, never especially attracted to South West Africa. The colony did appeal to other white groups, particularly Germans of lower or lower middle class background with limited capital, former members of Germany’s Protection Force (Schutztruppe), Afrikaners, and other foreigners. Ultimately, these came to comprise the bulk of South West Africa’s white population. While their settlement – particularly that of German nationals – was in the end regarded as necessary, it provoked debates in the colonies as well as the Reichstag that circled around the issue of how far the government could support a poor white underclass. Policies concerning the admission of poor whites into the colony also softened over time, with the recognition that German South West Africa required their labour and could ill afford to shut all poor, often foreign ‘undesirables’ out.

The softening of entrance requirements did not mean that GSWA permitted all whites in; on the contrary, various litmus tests were devised to determine whether someone should be allowed into the colony or, if they were already there, expelled from it. Such litmus tests were often financial, but they could also be moral. As Aitken suggests, “persons who were mentally ill, persons involved in prostitution and immigrants whose presence was adjudged to pose a potential threat to public safety” (p. 77) could also be excluded. German colonial authorities also questioned the very whiteness of such people with their supposed ‘defects’, demonstrating again that white was less of a biological category than it was a cultural and social one.

Aitken also argues that whiteness was – perhaps inevitably – most often called into doubt among whites who had social and sexual relationships with non-whites. Most of the Germans who originally settled in German South West Africa were male, and formed bonds with African women. These unions produced a large Eurafic population that unsettled notions of whiteness, especially because a consensus on their categorisation was difficult to reach. Early on, missionaries such as Carl Büttner endorsed the potential benefits of mixed marriage for Africans and Germans alike; Africans would be Christianised, while Germans would be able to legitimate their position in the colony by uniting themselves with powerful native families. Later, governmental objection to African-European relations, both from the metropole and colony, overrode these early missionary endorsements of mixed families. Persons of dual descent disrupted an imaginary racial hierarchy that divided South West Africa neatly into categories of Eingeborene (native) and Nicht-Eingeborene (non-native), meaning that their very presence threatened the German colonial project of recreating a dominant white, German community in Africa. It also meant that regulations were ultimately set in place which could
redefine who was Nicht-Eingeborene and who was Eingeborene.

At the same time, the application of the categories Eingeborene and Nicht-Eingeborene was uneven at best, so that exclusion often depended on a given individual’s social status within the settler community more than it did on legal authority. Well-to-do, respected farmers might be able to retain their whiteness better than those of less impressive background. The organisation of a household also became a significant marker of whiteness: If an African or dual-descent woman was able to run a clean, orderly, ‘German’ home, she, her husband, and their children might still be considered Nicht-Eingeborene. This uneven application of racial categorisation further affirms Aitken’s argument about the inherent instability of whiteness in GSWA.

The legal exclusion of children of dual descent was one solution to the perceived problem of miscegenation and concomitant deterioration of the white, German community. A further solution was – in German South West Africa as in other European colonies – the recruitment of white women settlers. The novels of Hans Grimm, which Aitken analyses in the fourth chapter, demonstrate the widely held belief that only German women could save their men from the temptations of African femininity. Time and again, in the discursive practice of Grimm and others, German men were pictured as susceptible to being ‘blackened’ and ‘going native’ through their association with African or mixed race women. The only way to halt – or reverse – this process of blackening was the introduction of a German woman, who had the potential to help the man reclaim his Germanness and reject all things African.

The seemingly fixed category of ‘white’, already under assault and needing constant redefinition because of the presence of poor whites and mixed marriages, was further challenged by the arrival and settlement of non-German whites, mainly Afrikaners. German officials in both colony and metropole were at first reluctant to condone the large-scale emigration of a non-German white population into what was imagined as an essentially German community. Eventually however, the lack of German interest in the colony led to a policy of begrudging accommodation to the Afrikaners, especially those whose behaviour matched the stereotypical German white ideal. Potential Afrikaner settlers were evaluated on the basis of cultural, as opposed to physical, markers of whiteness, just as German colonists had been. There was even a largely unsuccessful drive to Germanise acceptable Afrikaners through German language education and the inculcation of supposedly German values.

The attempt to fit some Afrikaners into the category of ‘white’, while excluding others based on a hypothetical lack of ‘white’ moral qualities, was representative of the broader effort to create an unchanging racial hierarchy in GSWA. Aitken proves that Germany consistently failed to establish such a hierarchy, and that concepts of race instead broke down into “gradations of whiteness”, as the book’s title suggests. White shaded into black, and in the end there were more than just the two racial categories.
of *Eingeborene* and *Nicht-Eingeborene* that colonial officials devised: Instead, there were multiple classifications of people as completely white, partially white, completely black, partially black, and various other groupings in between. Overall, this is an impressive book on whiteness and ethnic identity in German South West Africa. If Aitken’s study does somewhat echo the work of Kundrus, Wildenthal, and Walther, he also makes his own unique contributions to the burgeoning field of German colonial history, especially in his fresh, insightful analysis of Afrikaners in the German colonial milieu.

Sara Pugach  
California State University  
Los Angeles