

Gesine Krüger (2009), *Schrift – Macht – Alltag. Lesen und Schreiben im kolonialen Südafrika*, Köln, Weimar, Wien: Böhlau, ISBN 978-3-412-20116-6, 363 pp.

For over 40 years now, literacy studies have drawn the attention of literary scholars, social anthropologists and historians alike. Against the backdrop of decolonisation and globalisation in world politics, along with the linguistic turn and the crisis of representation in the social sciences, the study of literacy and orality has expanded and evolved into a broad, self-conscious and sophisticated (sub-)discipline. It is within this larger context and with a specific emphasis on colonial South Africa that Gesine Krüger has situated her study of the dynamics of communication and power in everyday life.

This publication is the reworked version of Krüger's 2003 postdoctoral dissertation, and it bears all the markings of that genre: a broad sweep with a simultaneously, detail-oriented analysis, extensive bibliographical data, engagement with theory, positioning of one's own approach within the methodological and ideological framework. These are the signs of a solid and well-researched scholarly work, although in ploughing through it, one at times wishes that it could have been trimmed somewhat of the heavy reliance on the trappings of academic discourse.

Krüger's stated aim is the delineation of historical transformations within a specific colonial society (cf. p. 25). Her study attempts to show that the conventional view of the use of literacy for the purposes of bureaucratic control of (and power over) the supposedly illiterate indigenous population by the colonial state by way of contracts, passes and laws requires revision, since it disregards the dialectic inherent in the situation. What has been largely overlooked and scarcely analysed is the way ordinary Africans appropriated writing and reading as an instrument of communication with the authorities as well as in a more domestic and seemingly trivial arena. The period under investigation is, perhaps not surprisingly, the time around the turn of the century when African political independence had been broken and South Africa had entered the industrial age on its way to the consolidation of white power under Union. What is surprising, as Krüger shows convincingly, is that a large section of the African population had already become immersed in a literate culture by this time, which meant being a member of a body in which the written word was a part of everyday culture, regardless of whether the people concerned could read or not.

This thesis requires subtle reasoning, and Gesine Krüger is to be congratulated for having resisted trotting out the old binary opposites of perpetrator and victim with their concomitant view of the world as a battlefield of antagonistic forces. Already in the mission schools and through the earliest

attempts by missionaries at producing reading matter, readers of the “black” newspapers were encouraged to tell their own stories, as it were, and assert their individuality. The Christian message became a powerful component of the nascent ideology of African nationalism and the creation of an educated African elite within the framework of a universalist and humanist discourse. However, the historic moment when this generation of African leaders insisted on their place in the colonial sun as full citizens on an equal footing coincided with the advance of scientific racism, the consolidation of Empire and the march of aggressive industrial capitalism. Post-war reconstruction in the first decade of the twentieth century amounted to reconciliation between Boer and Brit to the exclusion of “the natives”. Relatively early legislation aiming at spatial, social and institutional segregation created not only a process of tribalisation, or more precisely, *re*-tribalisation, as Krüger argues, but also an “ideological oralisation” (p. 214) of the African population which strove to banish Africans – with few exceptions – altogether from the public sphere and any political influence. The function of literacy, and its denial, is central to this process of realignment and disempowerment.

Krüger shows how the strand of literacy emerging from the mission schools led to the cul-de-sac of African aspirations, which could ultimately only be fulfilled via sustained resistance and the anti-Apartheid struggle. Yet reading and writing also seeped into the lives of ordinary, less-educated Africans, and this is the main thrust, and contribution, of her study. Basing her research largely on letters found in archives, mostly in Cape Town and Windhoek, the author reveals a fairly extensive and relatively early use of writing in private communication, especially between migrant labourers and their loved ones in the “homelands”. She also looks at letters, mostly of complaint over working conditions, which were sent to mining companies or the Native Affairs Department, as well as expressions of opinion in the “black press”. An interesting aspect of these written documents is the discussion around the origin of a public and private sphere among Africans in colonial society, which Krüger presents with conviction and insight.

As fascinating as this is, it also poses the biggest challenge to the researcher: While one can agree with Krüger that the notion of “quotidian literacy” is only beginning to take off in colonial historiography and there might well be large untapped collections of documents somewhere, the fact of the matter is that the nature of the source material is extremely problematic. The author herself came upon some of her sources by sheer chance, and in most instances the correspondence is restricted, fragmentary and, more seriously, one-sided. Thus the researcher has available only the arbitrary collection of letters written by the sender or his amanuensis, without the larger context of the production and reception of the correspondence.

Furthermore, there is an (unintended) gender bias, since virtually all the documents under discussion were produced by men. Problems arising from these conditions touch on the representativeness of the data as well as on the volume and scope, including geographical origin, of the material. The question of translating and the role of interlocutors deserves fuller and more in-depth attention than this study provides.

The study is not without flaws. I found the inclusion of the early Dutch period (p. 47-60) and migrant labour and its historiography (p. 110-128) too detailed and not altogether relevant, while most of Chapter 2 revisits familiar historical ground, which could have been abbreviated and more sharply focused. There are a number of typographical errors and some problems I had with regard to language and style. The few factual errors do not affect the good impression of the publication as a whole.

- Gunther Pakendorf