

Theophilus Wonja Michael (1879-1934) Flavia Cahn

Theophilus Wonja Michael was born on October 14th, 1879 in Bimbialand on the Atlantic coast of Cameroon, five years before the region would become part of the German colony of Kamerun (Ayangwe 2010: 23). In 1896 he travelled to Germany aboard a steam ship and settled in Berlin, where he would remain until his death in 1934 in Berlin Friedrichshain. Most of what is known about Theophilus Wonja Michael's life stems from the testimonies given by his children, of whom his son Theodor has been most active in re-telling his father's story. Aside from multiple interviews, Theodor Michael's autobiography *Black German: An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century* (translated by Eve Rosenhaft, 2017) has left a rich record of his own and his fathers' experiences as Afro-Germans in Berlin. Theophilus Wonja Michael's story is an example of the struggles faced by German colonial subjects trying to build a life in Germany, and is an important testimony to the experiences of the African diaspora in Berlin before the Nazi period. It is a reminder that black Berliners have been part of local history for much longer than is generally acknowledged, a side of history which often goes neglected.

Born into an aristocratic family, Theophilus Wonja Michael and his siblings had opportunities open to them which most of their fellow Cameroonians were excluded from. For wealthy indigenous elites of the colonies a connection to Europe, the colonial 'fatherland', was a symbol of prestige.^[1] Young aristocratic Cameroonians were encouraged by their families to study or train in Europe in order to take advantage of the educational opportunities available there. Travel to Europe was also seen as an escape from colonial oppression.^[2] Theophilus, born near the border of British-ruled Nigeria and fluent in English, was granted permission to study theology at Oxford University. Despite his family's wishes for him to become a pastor, Theophilus rejected this career path and diverted course to Germany instead.^[3] According to family history he arrived in Berlin around 1896, though he does not appear in German records until 1903.^[4]

During the German colonial period, colonial subjects were permitted to migrate from Africa to Germany only if "their presence was deemed beneficial to the aims of the colonial project".^[5] Though he was allowed to enter the country due his status as a resident of a German Protectorate, Theophilus was not considered a German citizen and was not expected to remain in the country long-term. People like Theophilus "occupied an inferior, ill-defined legal position" which tended to allow them access to more rights than in the colonies but still strictly restricted their everyday lives in Germany. Their position in German society was fairly precarious, but considerably safer than conditions after World War I when Africans in Germany lost their status as former colonial subjects, essentially rendering them stateless and stranded in Germany with no legal protection.

Once in Berlin, Theophilus initially found work as a laborer in U-Bahn construction. Aside from this, he also performed in the wildly popular Völkerschauen or human zoos, which were essentially shows of 'exotic' people often incorporated into circuses or travelling fairs.^[6] In these performances, African people were put on show like animals

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[1] Aitken, Robbie: *Making Visible the Invisible. Germany's Black diaspora, 1880s-1945*. Sheffield Hallam University, 10. October 2019.

[2] Michael, Theodor: *Black German. An Afro-German Life in the Twentieth Century*, translated by Eve Rosenhaft. Liverpool: 2017 (first published 2013). Liverpool University Press. S. 19.

[3] Michael, Juliana: Interview with Paulette Reed-Anderson. In: Reed-Anderson, Paulette: *Rewriting the Footnotes. Berlin and the African Diaspora*. Berlin: 2000. Die Ausländerbeauftragte des Berliner Senats. S. 74-78. Hier: S. 74-6.

[4] Vgl. Michael 2017: S. 20.

[5] Vgl. Aitken 2019.

[6] Reed-Anderson 2000: S. 22.

[7] Vgl. Michael 2017: S. 24.

[8] Vgl. ebd.

[9] Pareigis, Jana: "Sie sind Deutsch? Ja, klar. Afro-Deutsch". *Deutsche Welle*, 26. Februar 2009.

[10] Vgl. Michael 2000: S. 76.

[11] Aitken, Robbie/Rosenhaft, Eve: *Black Germany. The Making and Unmaking of a Diaspora Community, 1884-1960*. Cambridge: 2013. Cambridge University Press. S. 131.

[12] Vgl. Michael 2000: S. 76.

[13] Michael, Theodor: Ein Interview mit dem vorletzten schwarzen Zeugen der NS-Zeit. Interview by Arne Daniels and Kerstin Herrnkind. In: *Stern Panorama*, 23. October 2019.

for spectators to gawp at – a form of entertainment based on the idea that white European civilization was superior to all others. They were expected to portray the degrading and racist stereotypes of “uneducated savages, without culture and dressed in grass skirt”, a role projected onto them by white audiences.^[7] Beginning in the 1920s, Theophilus found work acting in silent films as an extra. Like the other Africans employed in stage performance of this kind, he was often asked to take the role of a nameless ‘exotic Other’. Völkerschauen and sporadic film roles were some of the only sources of work open to Black people in Germany who were excluded from the mainstream job market. Thus, they came to occupy an essential but undervalued and often invisible economic sector. Film sets became a meeting point for the African diaspora in Berlin and a community was formed around it. In a sense, the film industry was also a safe haven for Africans in Berlin: it provided them with a sense of belonging and place. The work was unreliable and often degrading, but it allowed Theophilus to earn a living and start a family.

Theophilus married Martha Wegner, a white German woman. A photo of the couple is dated 1914, but little information survives about where in the city they resided. Together they had four children: Christiana, James, Juliana, and Theodor. According to Theodor, he and his siblings led an “irregular but colorful life” at home, often working alongside their father in the Völkerschauen.^[8] They grew up feeling German yet also maintained a connection to their Cameroonian identity through the stories their father would tell them.^[9] Theophilus became a well-known figure in the Cameroonian and African diaspora community in Berlin, often acting as a first point of contact for newcomers and as a mediator between Cameroonians and the German authorities.^[10] In 1919 he would become one of the 17 co-signatories on the ‘Dibobe Petition’, a list of 32 demands advocating for political and social reform in the African colonies, a document named after fellow Cameroonian Quane e (Martin) Dibobe. This is evidence of Theophilus’ central role in the Cameroonian diaspora at the time; Theodor describes him as “protector of Cameroonians”.^[11]

His children describe Theophilus as an assertive person with a strong sense of dignity and pride. They saw him struggle against authority in a society where racism and discrimination constantly frustrated his plans and desires.^[12] He was strong-willed, bossy, charming, generous and proud.^[13] Later in life, however, Theophilus suffered health issues and alcoholism which eventually lead to the loss of custody over his children in 1929; his wife had died three years prior in 1926. The four siblings, the youngest (Theodor) only three years old, were separated and given to various foster families in the circus business where they were exploited as money-earners and severely mistreated.^[14] As his health declined further, Aitken and Rosenhaft’s (2013) research shows that Theophilus began to plan his return to Cameroon. Throughout the 1920s, unable to cover the costs of the trip himself, he repeatedly applied to the German government for repatriation with his second wife Marta Lehmann to no success. His plans to return were complicated by the fact that the region in question was now under British authority, which forbid Theophilus to return together with his white wife on racist grounds.^[15] Theophilus was never able to fulfil his wish to return to Cameroon and died in 1934 in hospital in Berlin Friedrichshain, aged 55.

With the glue that held their family together gone, the siblings’ lives took on different trajectories. James, aged twelve, was sent to work in various travelling circuses as an acrobat. His, Juliana and Christiana’s separate lives eventually led them all to France where they worked in traveling circuses. With the Nazis in now in power, ‘Aryanism’ threatened the existence of circuses and their diverse crews in Germany, so many circus groups embarked on tours or re-located to France to escape Nazi persecution.^[16] Theodor remained in Berlin, attending school for as long as he could despite the racist abuse he was exposed to, before mounting pressure by the Nazis led to his exclusion from the Gymnasium he was enrolled in.^[17]

Online:

<https://www.stern.de/panorama/weltgeschehen/theodor-michael-ein-interview-mit-dem-vorletzten-schwarzen-zeugen-der-ns-zeit-8965666.html>
(Zugriff: 21.01.2021).

[14] Vgl. Michael 2000: S. 73.; Michael 2017: S. 24

[15] Vgl. Aitken/Rosenhaft 2013: S. 109-110.

[16] Michael, James: Interview with Paulette Reed-Anderson in: Reed-Anderson 2000: S. 78.

[17] Vgl. Michael 2019.

[18] Vgl. Michael 2017: S. 39-40.

Reflecting on his father's early death, Theodor noted how traumatic his father's death was for him and his siblings, despite their prolonged separation from him. Still, as a survivor of Nazi Germany himself, Theodor knew that Theophilus' early death allowed him to avoid a more horrible fate at the hands of the Nazis: "It became clear to me later that his early death had saved him from the consequences of National Socialism. His temperament, his irascibility, his impatience, especially when dealing with authority, but also his sense of justice would doubtless have placed him in dangerous situations. He would certainly have ended up in a concentration camp."^[18] Theophilus' children have all passed away, but the testimonies left behind by Theodor and his siblings are important for shedding light on what life was like for Black Germans, experiences which rarely make the history books and which represent an under-researched side of German history. Theophilus Wonja Michael's life shows us that the German colonial period left its mark on Berlin and contributed to creating an Afro-German diaspora with a long and complex history.

Zitierangaben:

Flavia Cahn: Theophilus Wonja Michael (1879-1934). In: Kolonialismus begegnen. Dezentrale Perspektiven auf die Berliner Stadtgeschichte. URL: <https://kolonialismus-begegnen.de/geschichten/theophilus-wonja-michael-1879-1934/> (16.07.2021)