

Nancy Reagin, “Domesticity and German National Character,” *Sweeping the Nation: Domesticity and National Identity in Germany, 1870-1945* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 49-71.

Domesticity and German National Character

Polish management.

It looks like the Hottentots live here.

Popular sayings, used to describe sloppiness or chaos, as in household management

The preservation of Germanness demands a clean home. The drive to scrub, innate in our *Volk*, has a moral and national value.”

Käthe Schirmacher, a leading conservative German feminist, 1917

Clara Brockmann, a journalist and lecturer, went to German Southwest Africa for a lengthy visit during 1907–9, to study the lives of German women in the colony. After returning to Germany, Brockmann wrote and lectured widely about the need for more German women in German Southwest Africa. More women were needed in German colonies, she argued in a 1910 publication, because without their home-making skills, newly settled farms would not become true German homes:

[W]ithout the presence of a *Hausfrau*... a [colonial] farm cannot become *heimisch*, because only [her presence] secures German ways and customs, and a German family life... [I knew a bachelor farmer in Southwest Africa] whose animals thrive but whose house and rooms were in terribly neglected condition... [T]he farmer's study presented a picture of impressive disorder... [T]he desk had not been dusted for six months... [After his bride arrived from Germany] the unkempt dwelling was transformed into an inviting

rural home. In the kitchen and courtyard everything was well-organized . . . the rooms now resembled the comfortable abodes of the homeland.¹

Brockmann was drawing upon an understanding of what “German” ways and life-styles included, which was widely shared by her bourgeois contemporaries by the turn of the century. It was an understanding of Germanness that had developed alongside the model of domesticity that it incorporated, a set of assumptions about what it meant to be German that gradually spread among the urban bourgeoisie in the decades after German unification.

Like Italians after their nation’s unification, Germans had to be “invented.” Legal, national, and cultural definitions of what it meant to be German – which were revisions of earlier notions of Germanness, but now linked to the particular state and boundaries established in 1871 – developed gradually during the decades before World War I. The new nation had to create laws that established criteria for citizenship, decide whether or how to organize national institutions (e.g., a centralized railroad or postal system), and struggle to establish symbols for the German nation (e.g., a flag, national anthem, or national holiday). As we have seen, Imperial Germany never did designate an official national holiday or anthem, and only adopted a national flag in 1892. Even the postal and diplomatic systems were not merged before 1918; only in Weimar Germany were “German” (instead of Prussian or Saxon) stamps introduced.²

Although the unification of national institutions and establishment of national symbols was halting and incomplete, preexisting regional loyalties were gradually complemented by or even overshadowed (in most areas of Germany) by a growing allegiance to Germany as a whole, as a shared German national identity was consolidated before 1914. German national identity drew heavily upon preexisting regional and confessional identities, and was anchored in the long-shared

¹ Clara Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau in Südwestafrika. Ein Beitrag zur Frauenfrage in unseren Kolonien* (Berlin, 1910), 3–6.

² For the difficulties and delays in establishing a national holiday and unified postal, railroad, diplomatic systems, etc. see Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor* and Green, *Fatherlands*; for the debates over establishing criteria for German citizenship in the new nation, see Howard Sargent, “Diasporic Citizens: The Persistent Problem of Germans Abroad in German Citizenship Law, 1815–2000,” in O’Donnell, *The Heimat Abroad*.

sense – which went back at least to the eighteenth century – that the inhabitants of all the German states shared an overarching culture. At the same time, the coalescing sense of Imperial German national identity was implicitly challenged by competing or contradictory visions of what it meant to be German. German national identity was still a work in progress during the Imperial period (and beyond), as the Protestant bourgeoisie struggled to assert its vision of Germanness in opposition to competing understandings, which arose across the divides of class, religion, and region.³

Millions of ethnic Germans, for example, still lived throughout Central and Eastern Europe, usually in states where they felt perfectly “at home” (and thus did not necessarily look toward Imperial Germany as their “natural” allegiance).⁴ Within Germany, conservative nationalists and anti-Semites increasingly argued that the only “real” Germans were those who shared ethnic German ancestry. Simultaneously, members of some religious minority groups (e.g., German Jews or German Catholics) certainly considered themselves to be “good Germans,” but also developed their own diverse understandings of the national community. After 1890, settlers who immigrated to Germany’s new colonies also asserted their place within an expanded, imperial nation.⁵ Conflicting and competing visions or definitions of the German national community were possible because – like all nations – it was a community that was at least partly imagined. Because this national bonding was generated through the imagination, conflicting or minority interpretations of what it meant to be German were certainly possible.

³ For a discussion of recent work on the development of German national identity during the nineteenth century, including competing understandings of Germanness, see my review essay, “Recent Work on German National Identity,” 245–71.

⁴ For the identities and allegiances of ethnic Germans in the Hapsburg Empire, see Pieter Judson, “Inventing Germans: Class, Nationality and Colonial Fantasy at the Margins of the Hapsburg Monarchy,” *Social Analysis* 33 (1993): 47–67; and “Frontiers, Islands, Forests, Stones: Mapping the Geography of a German Identity in the Habsburg Monarchy, 1848–1900,” in Patricia Yaeger, ed., *The Geography of Identity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 382–406.

⁵ For a discussion of the place of German colonists in the national community, see Krista O’Donnell, “Home, Nation, Empire: Domestic Germanness and Colonial Citizenship” in O’Donnell, *The Heimat Abroad*. For the variations of German identity developed by members of different religious confessions, see Helmut Walser Smith, ed., *Protestants, Catholics and Jews in Germany, 1880–1914*.

The evolution of the imagined German national community was dependent on communication using print media, especially (although not exclusively) as shared among the German bourgeoisie. Journals, newspapers, magazines, and books (which were written in High German and assumed that their readers shared a common national identity) were read by increasing numbers of educated Germans across the nation (and in the colonies). This shared discourse helped to consolidate the imagined national community and to articulate a common identity. Bourgeois Germans debated and wrote a great deal about Germanness during the late nineteenth century: what it meant to be German; who was included in the community; and what were the core behaviors, values, and symbols that defined being a German. Although the understandings of Germanness proposed in these discussions were usually implicitly bourgeois, there were regional and confessional variations, as Protestant and Catholic German writers debated which literary works, for example, ought to be included in a national canon of German literature.⁶

Germans also wrote about other cultures, defining their own community and values through comparison and contrast with others. Although almost all Europeans who wrote on national character during the nineteenth century tended to define their own communities through contrast with other nations, German scholars and authors were, perhaps, particularly prone to self-definition opposition to or comparison with other cultures.⁷ But their preoccupation with the “innate” character of people from other cultures was not unique. The discussion of national character was a flourishing genre throughout the West in the nineteenth century, both in scholarly publications and in the popular press. Academics and popular writers produced a steady stream

⁶ For debates between Catholic and Protestant writers – almost all of them bourgeois – over what the German literary canon should include, or over what modern historians would call the “master narratives” of German historiography, see Smith, *German Nationalism and Religious Conflict*, 22–34.

⁷ See James, *A German Identity*, 15, who writes that particularly in Germany, “an extreme willingness to make comparisons went hand in hand with ever more aggressive German nationalism.” For a discussion of how travel literature shows a pan-European tendency to define one’s own nationality through contrast, see Marjorie Morgan, *National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain* (Palgrave: New York, 2001).

of cultural or “moral” histories of other cultures (both ancient and contemporary), travel literature, and entertainment pieces for popular magazines, which drew upon, expanded, and elaborated on earlier national stereotypes about the customs and “typical” personality traits of Germans and other Europeans. More adventurous authors traveled outside of Europe, and published books describing American life and the life-styles and mentality of “backward” peoples in the non-Western world (generally colonial subjects).⁸

Like their counterparts in other Western nations, German geographers, historians, literary critics, and other academics produced a voluminous literature that compared the “innate” virtues and traits of Germans with those of other nationals.⁹ Even in the eighteenth century, German writers such as Campe argued that order and cleanliness were particular German virtues. Nineteenth-century authors on national character before 1870 often argued in general terms that German housewives kept cleaner houses. A typical example was the well-known geographer Hermann Daniel, who noted in passing in 1865 that “it can hardly be calculated how long the cleaning festival that a German

⁸ Many modern historians have examined the genre of national character discussed here. For an introduction to this literature in Germany, see Jürgen Link and Wulf Wülfing, eds., *Nationale Mythen und Symbole in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts. Strukturen und Funktionen von Konzepten nationaler Identität* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta Verlag, 1991). See also Charlotte Tacke, *Denkmal im sozialen Raum*, 44–51 and “Nation und Geschlechtscharaktere” in Frauen und Geschichte Baden-Württemberg, eds., *Frauen und Nation* (Tübingen: Silberberg, 1996), 35–48; Alexander Schmidt, *Reisen in die Moderne. Der Amerika-Diskurs des deutschen Bürgertums vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg im europäischen Vergleich* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1997); Ulle Siebert, “Reise. Nation. Text. Repräsentationen von ‘Nationalität’ in Reisetexten deutscher Frauen, 1871–1914” in *Frauen und Nation*, 49–65.

⁹ See James, *A German Identity*, and the numerous articles on “national character” in Link and Wülfing, *Nationaler Mythen und Symbole*. See also Kirsten Belgum, “A Nation for the Masses: Production of the German Identity in the Late-Nineteenth-Century Popular Press” in Scott Denham, Irene Kacandes, and Jonathan Petropoulos, eds., *A User’s Guide to German Cultural Studies* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 163–80 and *Popularizing the Nation. Audience, Representation, and the Production of Identity in Die Gartenlaube, 1853–1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1998). For a description of a 1850s museum exhibition on German national character in daily life, which included a “Frauenhalle” on domestic objects, see Annelore Rieke-Müller and Siegfried Müller, “Konzeptionen der Kulturgeschichte um die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts: Das Germanische Nationalmuseum in Nürnberg und die Zeitschrift für Deutsche Kulturgeschichte,” *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 82(2) (2000): 345–75.

housewife would immediately begin, would last, if she entered an Italian home.”¹⁰

Women’s roles and status, along with life-style and family life, were often discussed in comparative European works on national character. Some writers indeed claimed that women’s position was a sort of yardstick for the overall “progress” of the culture as a whole, and pointed to such practices as concubinage, polygamy, child marriage, suttee, and foot binding as proof that non-Western cultures were barbaric and degraded.¹¹ German authors also discussed gender roles and private life in their surveys of national character, although they seemed to be less interested in the sexual enslavement of non-Western women, compared to their British and American counterparts.¹² Instead, domesticity assumed a prominent role in many German works on national character, particularly those written by bourgeois women.

During the nineteenth century the model of domesticity that developed among the German bourgeoisie along with its attendant symbols and practices – sparkling white, pressed linens; immaculate rooms; the Sunday roast and cake; a carefully kept household account book; a generally labor-intensive style of housekeeping; and the German Christmas tree – became a yardstick for measuring other nations’ households and for defining German identity through domestic contrasts. A particular approach to domesticity, which had begun as a project of class formation, now became a commonplace vehicle for the articulation of national identity. Similar to other debates over German identity, such as those about the national literary canon or “master themes” of German historiography, the discourse on household management and Germanness was implicitly bourgeois. But within the bourgeoisie, this understanding of Germanness had considerable success and ultimately attracted support across religious and regional boundaries.

¹⁰ In his *Handbuch der Geographie* 4 vols., 2nd ed. (Leipzig: O. R. Reisland, 1865–8), quoted in Link, *Nationaler Mythen*, 50.

¹¹ For a discussion of how non-Western women were usually depicted as being degraded and sexually enslaved by Western authors during this period, see Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 116–18.

¹² For the comparatively lesser importance of sexuality in establishing Western superiority in German colonial texts, see Krista O’Donnell, “The Colonial Woman Question: Gender, National Identity, and Empire in the German Colonial Society Female Emigration Program, 1896–1914,” (Ph.D. Diss., SUNY Binghamton, 1996).

Domestic Practices in Other Cultures: National Stereotypes and German Identity

After 1870, national identity became increasingly prominent in discussions of German domesticity and advice literature for housewives. This “nationalized” domesticity was only one of the many projects of nation building promoted by the German bourgeoisie during this period.¹³ In German discussions of domesticity, as in other aspects of nation building, identity was articulated through opposition with imagined others. In the same texts where writers of advice literature articulated their ideal of housewifery and the *Hausfrau*, they also asserted that German women kept house in a fashion that was different from and superior to the housekeeping of women from other cultures. Articles and stories about women from around the world were staples in nineteenth-century German women’s magazines, interspersed with sewing patterns and child-rearing tips. An examination of stereotypes about what kind of housekeepers *other* women were (e.g., the recurring cliché that English women left all their work to servants, or that French women were disproportionately interested in fashion and socializing) reveals how the self-understanding of bourgeois German housewives was constructed in opposition to imagined foreign housekeeping. Bourgeois discussions of housekeeping are an example of the conflation of national and class identity and symbols that was so common among the European bourgeoisie of this period. They are also examples of a popular variant of the widespread discussion of national character.

Women’s magazines frequently ran articles on women and the family in foreign cultures. Some focused on the lives of women in other Western nations (especially Britain, France, and the United States), while others examined women in more “exotic” cultures (e.g., Mongol, “Gypsy,” Arab, Chinese, Ceylonese, Mexican, Egyptian, Burmese, Turkish, Indian, West African, and Eskimo women). Authors described the wedding customs of foreign women and their approaches to housekeeping, sickbed nursing, child rearing, cooking, and clothing

¹³ For discussions of nation building among the German bourgeoisie as a whole, see George Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses: Political Symbolism and Mass Movements in Germany from the Napoleonic Wars through the Third Reich* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991) and Confino, *The Nation as Local Metaphor*.

production.¹⁴ Some pieces were written by German women who had lived with their families in these societies; others were allegedly written by German women who had worked as governesses abroad, which purported to show the workings of foreign households from an insider's standpoint. Collectively, these pieces constituted a genre, a kind of travel literature for housewives.

In discussing the shortcomings of foreign housekeepers, writers defined, by implication or explicit contrast, the alleged virtues of German housekeeping in much more concrete terms than had the male academics who wrote on national character during the same period. In the process of doing so, these authors linked German national character to the specific practices of bourgeois housekeeping discussed in Chapter 1, creating a pan-German vision of domesticity that was relentlessly bourgeois, represented by particular domestic symbols such as the linen cabinet and the scrubbed kitchen floor.

These articles were not all negative in tone; however, they often treated their subjects as interesting or exotic. Authors found much to admire in foreign housewives. They praised the precision with which Dutch housewives organized their households, the lovely jewelry worn by Arab women, and the beautifully embroidered curtains made by Swedish housewives. But authors almost invariably found foreign households lacking in comparison with an idealized "German" household. Most shortcomings were derived from the fact that foreign housekeeping (as depicted) was less labor intensive.

It was a truism in German women's publications, for example, that English bourgeois women left all their work to servants, rarely setting

¹⁴ The articles discussed in this paper were taken from a survey of the following periodicals: *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung*, *Die Frau im Osten* (which addressed women in the eastern provinces of the Empire), *Fürs Haus. Praktisches Wochenblatt für alle Hausfrauen*, and *Die Welt der Frau*, the women's supplement to the enormously popular illustrated family magazine *Gartenlaube*. The first two magazines show the overlap between housewives' organizations and their advice literature because both were published by leaders of bourgeois women's associations. These two periodicals were edited by women, and almost all of their contributions came from women. The latter two publications were edited by men, although many of the pieces I cite from those publications were written by women. For each periodical, I selected at least five years from the period between 1885 and 1914 (depending upon availability of sources) and read through all issues from the chosen volumes.

foot inside a kitchen (where – lacking the oversight of a mistress – enormous wastage of food and hence money allegedly occurred).¹⁵ French women, on the other hand, spent more time in the kitchen, but were sometimes depicted as being overly concerned with fine food and fashion at the expense of other household concerns.¹⁶ They were elegant and chic, but also often coldhearted and less concerned about their families (i.e., less hard working) than their German counterparts. This recurring stereotype of Frenchwomen surfaces, for example, in a 1905 poem published in the *Praktische Berlinerin* (a magazine for middle-strata Berlin housewives), which contrasted Parisian women with Berlin women. The Parisian was castigated as a “fashion queen”; the Berlin *Hausfrau*, by contrast, was “a woman for real life [*die Frau fürs Leben* or a woman to go through life with].” The poem concluded with a promise that the magazine would instruct “all who want to make a home and hearth according to German custom and nature.”¹⁷

The strengths associated with French women (cooking and fashion) are linked to sociability and public display, precisely those characteristics associated with the French in German academic and popular literature on national character. The French were often depicted by nineteenth-century German writers as frivolous, sociable, quick in action and thought, and “light” (in a moral sense). One widely published German pedagogue reflected this common stereotype when he observed that although French women were graceful, charming, and fashionable, “the duties observed daily by a [German] mother and spouse, the sacrifices that she gladly and willingly undertakes . . . these are all unknown to most French women . . . the restrictions [i.e., thrift and hard work] observed in a German household are unknown to French housewives and would be absolutely rejected by them.” Many

¹⁵ See “Das Dienstbotenproblem in England,” *Die Welt der Frau* 39 (1909), where the assertion about leaving all the work to servants is simply presented as an established fact. See also “Kinderleben in England,” *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 15 (1888) Nr. 1; see the same assertions that British housewives lacked frugality, and left all their housework to their servants in Sidgwick, *Home Life in Germany*.

¹⁶ See, e.g., “Erlebnisse einer deutschen Erzieherin in Frankreich, 1870–1871,” in *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 13 (1886) Nr. 26.

¹⁷ Quoted in Wiesmann, *Froh erfülle deine Pflicht*, 229.

French marriages were marriages of convenience, he concluded, where both spouses tolerated adultery.¹⁸

France was often coded as feminine and as morally suspect, while German authors on national character depicted Germany and England as masculine. In this literature, academics contrasted French frivolity and public sociability with Germans' supposed patience and preference for traditional values; Germans were also alleged to prefer their own homes.¹⁹ The poem in the *Praktische Berliner* faithfully mirrored these stereotypes, firmly linking the German housewife to home and hearth.

A series of articles in *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* depicted Dutch housewives as being equal to German women in terms of cleanliness and organization (they even had proper linen cabinets), but they were insufficiently thrifty and hard working: Dutch women supposedly reached these standards only by contracting out much of their work.²⁰ In another magazine article, which was otherwise largely positive, one author nevertheless concluded that an Italian woman

puts little value on scouring her cooking pots, and keeping them gleaming, but does like to keep her own person [body] clean . . . "working from dawn 'til dusk" is not to her taste. She would never agree to get down on her knees, in order to properly wash the floor.²¹

No one, it seemed, worked as hard as German housewives. When describing foreign women who were attractive in some respects, but less industrious than Germans, writers sometimes compared their subjects to the lilies described in the New Testament: "they labor not, nor do they spin."²² Writers invariably employed only the better known,

¹⁸ Gotthold Kreyenberg, *Mädchenerziehung und Frauenleben im Aus- und Inlande. Neudruck der Ausgabe Berlin 1872 mit Einleitung von Ruth Bleckwahn* (Paderborn: Hüttemann Verlag, 1990), 230.

¹⁹ See Ute Gerhard and Jürgen Link, "Zum Anteil der Kollektivsymbolik an den Nationalstereotypen" in Link and Wülfing, *Nationale Mythen und Symbole*, 22–30.

²⁰ See the multipart series on Dutch housewives that began in *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 14 (1887) Nr. 30.

²¹ From "Italienische Dienstboten" in *Die Welt der Frau* (1909) Nr. 16.

²² For the biblical passage, from Luke 12: 27–28, on the lilies of the field, which was used to describe women as diverse as New York housewives and East African women, see "Unsere Schwestern in Deutsch-Ostafrika," in *Die Welt der Frau* (1908) Nr. 39., and "Daisys Budget," in *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 22 (1895) Nr. 36. This metaphor was also invoked when discussing women who lived in harems.

short version of this passage (Luke 12:27–28), to evoke the concept of a beauty that is linked to leisure. The ideal “German” housewife, defined in contrast to the idle lilies, resembled the virtuous wife of Proverbs 31:15–27, whose price is “far above rubies. . . . She rises while it is yet night and provides food for her household and tasks for her maiden. . . . She puts her hands to the distaff, and her hands hold the spindle. . . . She looks well to the ways of her household and does not eat the bread of idleness.”

Most non-Western women were depicted as inferior housekeepers almost by definition. Many, such as “Gypsies” and African women, did not have homes in European-style buildings at all, and thus supposedly could not keep them clean to begin with. Others, such as Slavic women or Mexican housewives lived in buildings that they did not keep as clean as Germans, although the authors praised these women’s cooking, embroidery, and sewing.²³ In these articles, housekeeping thus served to draw racial and national boundaries. African women in particular did not keep house or cook in any meaningful sense of the word, according to one article in *Die Welt der Frau*, but rather lived as innocents in the Garden of Eden:

Nature freely (that is, without much work on part of these people) offers an excessive array of foods. . . . Thus one can hardly blame the native population, which has such simple needs and tastes, for never having really learned the meaning of work. . . . [T]he making of meals is a downright primitive affair. The men sit crouched around a small fire . . . , a large basket of fruit is picked off of the nearest banana tree, and each person simply roasts his fruit himself over the open fire. The black housewife can thus take care of dinner by simply obeying the command of her lord and master when he tells her: “light the fire!”²⁴

African women would only learn to do “real” housework when they were compelled to work as servants in Europeans’ homes.²⁵

²³ See “Die Frau im Norden und die im Süden der neuen Welt,” in *Die Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung*, 23 (1896) Nr. 27; “Unsere Schwestern in Deutsch-Ostafrika,” in *Die Welt der Frau* (1908) Nr. 39; “Die Wanderzigeuner Siebenbürgens,” in *Die Welt der Frau* (1909) Nr. 15; “Von den Frauen des Ostens,” *Die Welt der Frau* (1913) Nr. 17.

²⁴ See “Unsere Schwestern in Deutsch-Ostafrika,” in *Die Welt der Frau* (1908) Nr. 39.

²⁵ For Africans as servants, see the discussion of German colonial homes on pages 63–5 of this chapter.

Articles on women in the United States appeared regularly in women's publications, both during the Imperial period and later.²⁶ The descriptions of American housewives were uneasy and ambivalent at best, although they often commented admiringly on some aspects of American women's lives. American women were seen as practical, well-educated, often athletic, independent, and involved in community affairs; but they were hardly seen as "domestic." Indeed, one woman who wrote for the German family magazine *Gartenlaube* concluded in a defensive tone that American women were so well-educated and professional that they must eventually come to look down on German women, "because from their standpoint, we are too industrious, too conscientious in little things, too domestic, and too thrifty."²⁷

And yet, American women's virtues cut both ways; although they were better educated and more civic-minded, American women were supposedly inferior homemakers. They were so practical that their homes were not *gemütlich* (cozy and comfortable), and they spent too much time shopping, which signified a lack of both industry and thrift.²⁸ Some writers argued that American women's distaste for housework caused them to abandon the concept of the home entirely, leading them and their families to take up residence in boarding houses, which German observers bemoaned as a widespread phenomenon in late-nineteenth-century America. As with French housewives, the depictions of American women echoed the broader discussions of American national character among German academics who saw the United States as possessing a vibrant civic culture, but as lacking traditional European family structures and true *Kultur*.²⁹

²⁶ For discussions of how Germans perceived American society more generally, see James, *A German Identity*, 26–7 and Schmidt, *Reisen in die Moderne*. For the 1920s, see also Nolan, *Visions of Modernity*, 109 and 206–34.

²⁷ Quoted in Schmidt, *Reisen in die Moderne*, 195.

²⁸ For descriptions of American housewives before World War I, see "Die Frau im Norden und die im Süden der neuen Welt," in *Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 23 (1896) Nr. 27; "Daisys Budget," in *Deutsche Hausfrauen-Zeitung* 22 (1895) Nr. 36; and "Will die Amerikanerin sich wirklich von Mann, Haushalt, und Kind losreißen?" in *Die Frau im Osten* 8 (1914) Nr. 20. For the same stereotypes in Weimar publications, see Lissy Sysemihl-Gliedemeister, "Über amerikanische Frauentätigkeit" in the *Jahrbuch des Reichsverbandes Deutscher Hausfrauenvereine* (1929), 141–55; "Hausfrau und Volkswirtschaft. Das Fiasko der Konsumfinanzierung in Amerika," in *Die Deutsche Hausfrau* 12 (1927), 74; and Heinz Potthoff, "Erwerbstätigkeit und Hausfrauengeist," in *Die Deutsche Hausfrau* 13 (1928), 50–2.

²⁹ See Schmidt, *Reisen in die Moderne*, 190–216.

Thus in the end, although women from foreign cultures had their own talents and charms, they simply refused to get down on their knees and scrub like a German housewife, or keep such well-organized household account books and linen cabinets. In many ways, this insistence on German cleanliness and thrift was a feminine extension of the discourse on German *Qualitätsarbeit* (quality work), the widely shared belief in the superiority of German industrial design and workmanship. By emphasizing their own hard work, bourgeois housewives could thus connect themselves to the larger contemporary project of nation building. The symbols and practices they chose to emphasize were generally implicitly limited to the urban bourgeoisie, but this was true of most of the Germans who contributed to discussions of German national identity.

German Domesticity Abroad: National Identity and Colonial Housekeeping

The “Germanness” (and inherent superiority) of specific domestic symbols and approaches to housekeeping also featured prominently in depictions of German colonial housewives in colonial magazines and memoirs that circulated among the bourgeoisie in Wilhelmine Germany, and later during the Weimar period. Similar to the broader genre of housewives’ magazines and advice literature, popular literature on women in the German colonies was largely (but not entirely) written by bourgeois women. Most of these authors promoted German women’s immigration to the colonies; some had actually resided in German Southwest Africa and wrote about their experiences after returning to Germany. Many writers were affiliated with the Women’s League of the German Colonial Society, whose organ was the popular weekly illustrated magazine *Kolonie und Heimat*, which circulated far beyond the circles of those who actually belonged to colonial booster groups.³⁰ The Herero rebellion of 1904–5 had greatly increased public interest and awareness of Germany’s colonies, and helped increase the sales of all sorts of colonial publications, including those written by and for bourgeois women.³¹ These publications were generally aimed at

³⁰ For the popularity of *Kolonie und Heimat*, see Joachim Warmbold, *Germania in Africa. Germany’s Colonial Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 91 and 241.

³¹ Bourgeois women also had access to other sources of information about Germans in Africa, such as the newspaper accounts and novels written by men for a broader

the metropolitan audience with the exception of *Kolonie und Heimat*, which also circulated within Germany's colonies.

Magazine articles and memoirs written by or for colonial housewives addressed the same audiences as did more general housewives' advice literature, but had a somewhat different function and goals. They were intended to entertain and to educate, but also to promote support for Germany's colonies and imperial projects, and to recruit new immigrants among female audiences. The Women's League in particular had embarked on a project of promoting women's immigration to Southwest Africa. At the same time, however, much of the material in women's memoirs and in *Kolonie und Heimat* did focus on housekeeping advice for colonial housewives or would-be female immigrants. Large sections of *Kolonie und Heimat*, in particular, strongly resembled the "women's page" of German newspapers, offering information about colonial fashions, recipes, gardening, and general housekeeping questions. Memoirs by colonial housewives also offered future immigrants detailed advice on the preparation and storage of food and clothing, household routines, and gardening.

In some respects, publications by or about colonial housewives thus resembled the larger body of housewives' advice literature and

bourgeois audience (e.g., the best-selling 1906 novel *Peter Moors Fahrt nach Südwest*), but these publications paid comparatively little interest to questions of domesticity and housekeeping. For memoirs and travel literature written by women who had been to Africa, see Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau in Südwestafrika*; Else Sonnenberg, *Wie es am Waterberg zugeht. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Hereroaufstandes* (Berlin: W. Süsserott, 1905); Ada Cramer, *Weiss oder Schwarz. Lehr- und Leidensjahre eines Farmers in Südwest im Lichte des Rassenhasses* (Berlin: Deutscher Kolonial-Verlag, 1913); Margarethe v. Eckenbrecher, Helene v. Falkenhausen, Stabsarzt Dr. Kuhn, and Oberleutnant Stuhlmann, *Deutsch-Südwestafrika. Kriegs- und Friedensbilder* (Leipzig: E. S. Mittler, 1907); Helene v. Falkenhausen, *Ansiedlerschicksale. Elf Jahre in Deutsch-Südwestafrika 1893–1904* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1905); Margarethe v. Eckenbrecher, *Was Afrika mir gab und nahm. Erlebnisse einer deutschen Frau in Südwestafrika*, rev. ed. (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1940); and Maria Karow, *Wo sonst der Fuss des Kriegers trat. Farmerleben in Südwest nach den Kriege* (Berlin: E. S. Mittler, 1909). For a discussion of German colonists in popular Wilhelmine and Weimar fiction, see Warmbold, *Germania in Africa*, and Sibylle Benninghoff-Lühl, "Ach Afrika! Wäre ich zu Hause! Gedanken zum Deutschen Kolonialroman der Jahrhundertwende," in Renate Nestvogel and Rainer Tetzlaff, eds., *Afrika und der Deutsche Kolonialismus. Zivilisierung zwischen Schnapsbandel und Bibelstunde* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer, 1987), 83–100. For a broader history of the migration of women to German Southwest Africa, see Krista E. O'Donnell, "The Colonial Woman Question"; see also Lora Wildenthal, *German Women for Empire, 1884–1945*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Florence Hervé, ed., *Namibia. Frauen mischen sich ein* (Berlin: Orlanda Frauenverlag, 1993).

magazines. They offered German female audiences an imperial variation on the housekeeping template presented in *Davidis* and in housewives' magazines. They introduced metropolitan readers to Germany's colonies and colonial subjects, and presented the bourgeois housewife as a key part of the imperial project. But these depictions of colonial housewives also served as a mirror for metropolitan readers, reflecting back an "essence" of German housewifery, thrown into relief by a foreign setting.³²

Colonial depictions highlighted how German housewives (and their practices of domesticity) helped to reproduce nationality and ethnicity. Their roles resembled those analyzed by Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias in the case of women in other ethnic groups. As Yuval-Davis and Anthias note, women often function to establish boundaries for ethnic or national groups (because their relations with men of other groups are controlled), as well as to transmit the symbols, languages, and customs that help to define the group's identity.³³ In the colonial literature discussed, German housewives filled all of these roles.

As in more general housewives' magazines, colonial publications defined "German" styles of housekeeping through contrast with imagined others: in this case, African housewives. Whether they were Herero, Damara, or Khoi, Africans were invariably described as ill-clad, dirty, and malodorous (at least until they came under the control of whites). They were infested with vermin, and smeared themselves with a paste made out of oil and dirt.³⁴ German female authors described African homes as "huts" or "hovels," which lacked the doors, windows, and separate rooms for different activities that

³² I am more concerned here with metropolitan perceptions of colonial housekeeping than with the reality of women's work in the German colonies.

³³ From Nira Yuval-Davis and Floya Anthias, eds., *Woman-Nation-State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), 8–10.

³⁴ Comments on the poor personal hygiene of Africans were ubiquitous in travel literature and memoirs. See, e.g., Karow, *Wo sonst der Fuss*, 33–4 and Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau in Südwesafrika*, 25–8. See Timothy Burke, *Lifebuoy Men and Lux Women. Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 24–5; see also Jean and John Comaroff, "Homemade Hegemony: Modernity, Domesticity, and Colonialism in South Africa," in Karen T. Hansen, ed., *African Encounters with Domesticity* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 37–74; Nancy Rose Hunt, "Colonial Fairy Tales and the Knife and Fork Doctrine in the Heart of Africa," in Hansen, *African Encounters*, 143–71.

characterized European homes. Maria Karow, who kept house for her invalid sister in Southwest Africa for two years, published a memoir later that described the life-style and character of her sister's servants in some detail. She wrote that the homes of all Africans resembled "molehills," without proper doors or ventilation.³⁵ Margarethe v. Eckenbrecher, who published a memoir about her work as a teacher in Southwest Africa, also compared the typical African home to "an enormous, grey-brown molehill." Eckenbrecher did add later, however, that these homes were kept tolerably clean, an admission that set her apart from almost all other writers on the subject.³⁶

Because of the shortage of German brides, many colonists had supposedly been "forced" to marry African or mixed-race women. German memoirists stigmatized such women as wasteful, inferior housekeepers.³⁷ Helene v. Falkenhausen's characterization of African housewives was typical: "What a tragic life is led [by the settlers] who have married a native born woman! These women are generally too lazy to pay sufficient attention to the household, and too stupid to learn how to do so."³⁸ Colonial authors repeatedly stressed that it was almost impossible to teach African women "real" (German) housekeeping. This alleged incapacity of African housewives helped to establish domestic racial difference and hierarchies in situations where an individual's "race" was often unclear or problematic (e.g., "Europeanized" mixed-race *Bastards* in Southwest Africa).³⁹ Settlers who married local women were often referred to as *verkaffert* ("kaffirized") because they adopted the allegedly poor standard of living and morals of their wives. Colonial boosters argued that the increased immigration of German women would "rescue" German men from the necessity of marrying such women. German women would thus help to maintain the "purity" of

³⁵ Karow, *Wo sonst der Fuss*, 154 and 33.

³⁶ Eckenbrecher, *Was Afrika mir gab und nahm*, 27 and 32.

³⁷ For a discussion of why German settlers might have preferred to marry local women, see O'Donnell, "The Colonial Woman Question," 46–9.

³⁸ In Eckenbrecher et al., *Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, 27. See also the disparaging remarks about the housekeeping of African or *Bastard* women in Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau*, 25–8; see also "Die Frau und die Kolonien," in *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung*, May 30, 1905, 122.

³⁹ The "race" of individuals who came to German Southwest Africa from the Cape Colony, or the *Bastard* community, was sometimes the subject of heated controversy. See O'Donnell, "The Colonial Woman Question," 48.

the German race, as their presence would help prevent the formation of yet more marriages that produced mixed-race children.

As Krista O'Donnell notes, colonial boosters (especially the Women's League of the Colonial Society) argued that if German women were urged to immigrate to the colonies, they would not only help establish racial boundaries, they would also create a "German" way of life within their new households.⁴⁰ Similar to Clara Brockmann, popular writers about German colonial households generally insisted that when a settler married and brought a German housewife to his farm, she immediately introduced metropolitan domestic standards. Indeed, the cleanliness and order described by these authors would have been remarkable in German peasant households, and sometimes sounded suspiciously bourgeois. Pains-taking cleanliness, above all, was both a marker of ethnic identity abroad and a reminder of the homeland. Maria Karow wrote that when she visited the homes of several artisans who had migrated to Africa,

[t]heir wives greeted me and showed me with pride their households, in which everything was so clean that it gleamed. If the African servants had not been there, I would have thought myself in Germany.⁴¹

Several authors described how a German housewife began almost immediately to outfit her home with the objects that symbolized good urban bourgeois housekeeping at home, especially white curtains and embroidered, framed proverbs on the walls. One writer wrote that as soon as a woman arrived,

there begins a hammering and washing... muslin curtains and pure white linens give the house the stamp of a German home... now the wash is conscientiously scrubbed twice with soap, boiled, and bleached on the lawn; after being ironed, it is put – now snow white – in the linen cabinet.⁴²

Other writers noted how women hung white curtains and *Andenken* (framed sayings) as one of their first acts after arriving. Considering the difficulties of maintaining an urban metropolitan standard of hygiene in Southwest Africa (where there was a lack of running water – or often any clean water – amidst extremely dusty conditions, along with

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Karow, *Wo sonst der Fuss*, 128.

⁴² Emmy Möller, "Die deutsche Frau in der Südsee," *Kolonie und Heimat* 3 (1910): 6–7.

an abundance of apparently ferociously aggressive termites) one may be skeptical about such claims.

The linen cabinet, the pride of the German housewife, was mentioned by other writers. Margarethe v. Eckenbrecher described how British soldiers searched her linen cabinet for contraband during World War I in a scene that juxtaposed images of domesticity, gender, and nationality. She described how the Englishmen (who had occupied German Southwest Africa) “opened the cabinet, which looked very pretty and orderly inside. The sweaty soldiers’ hands seemed to shrink back when confronted with so much snow white linen. They reached for the front stack only hesitantly.”⁴³ Because the soldiers shrank from disturbing the perfect, white stacks of sheets, they never discovered the weapons she had hidden behind her linens: a small victory for German domesticity.

Writers repeatedly claimed that German housewives were thriftier than African or mixed-race women, keeping orderly household accounts and writing a *Küchenzettel* (menu plan) for each week. Several memoirists noted that each Sunday, as in Germany, they prepared a roast and *Sonntagskuchen* (the cake eaten on Sunday afternoons with coffee).⁴⁴

Taken collectively, these accounts thus presented metropolitan readers with before and after pictures, showing the impact of German housewives. German bachelors were shown living with (and often like) natives, in distressing disorder, their connection to German culture slowly unraveling. When the housewife narrator entered the story, readers saw the colony through her eyes and were introduced to local agricultural practices and terrains, local cuisines (e.g., Southwest African melons and beverages), and the economic value of the colony. The housewife then worked to establish German domestic symbols

⁴³ Eckenbrecher, *Was Afrika mir gab und nahm*, 208.

⁴⁴ For the thrifty management of German colonist housewives, see Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau*, 14–15; Antonie Brandeis, “Die deutsche Hausfrau in den Kolonien,” *Kolonie und Heimat* 1(4) (Nov. 10, 1907): 12; Anonymous, *Aus Südwestafrika*, 53. For the maintenance of the tradition of the Sunday cake and roast, see Karow, *Wo sonst der Fuss*, 115–16 and Brockmann, *Die deutsche Frau*, 11–12. *Kolonie und Heimat* regularly featured proposed *Küchenzettel* for settler women, which incorporated some local ingredients but maintained the basic patterns and structure of German bourgeois cuisine. See, e.g., M. Rädnitzer, “Zwei unentbehrliche Freunde der Farmersfrau,” in *Kolonie und Heimat* 1(19) (June 6, 1908).

and practices within the household: the cabinet full of snowy linens (in spite of dust and termites); the Sunday cake; and the orderly account book. She thus "Germanized" the household within a colonial context: demarcating colonists from the colonized, linking housework to empire building, and enlisting metropolitan women's support for German imperialism.⁴⁵

Making "German" homes in a colonial context, housewives thus contributed to the creation of communities of Germans in Africa that resembled the idealized, orderly small towns of the homeland, at least in literature for metropolitan audiences. In the best-selling novel *Peter Moor's Journey to Southwest Africa* (one of the most popular novels of the Wilhelmine period), the narrator links the domesticity of the homeland with that of the colony in emotionally laden descriptions of the care given to their families by German housewives. When Peter tells his mother that he is leaving home to join the Navy, "she went quietly into the kitchen and said nothing more about it to me. In the fall [before he departed] she gave me a set of linens, everything pure, clean, and mended, as was proper." He contrasts this cleanliness and supply of appropriate linens with the filth and partial nudity of the Africans he encounters in the colony. When, after weeks of fighting Africans in the desert, his patrol comes across a German settler family, their farm is depicted as a sort of domestic paradise: "There, in the shadow of the veranda, stood a German woman . . . how we rejoiced to see her bright, clean dress, and her pure, friendly face."⁴⁶

In popular literature about the German colonies, the colonial housewife thus symbolized the model of domestic life and practices that writers associated with the German home. The details that authors incorporated into their descriptions, however, were often more typical of bourgeois metropolitan households than of colonial homesteads, which lacked all the amenities of urban life. Rural colonial farms required an entirely different sort of wife and "helpmeet" for the German settler. This fact helps to explain why male colonists repeatedly rejected the "fine ladies" that they feared the Women's Colonial League would sponsor as immigrants, and instead sometimes insisted on

⁴⁵ For an analysis of how domesticity and cleanliness served to define German colonial identity, see O'Donnell, "The Colonial Woman Question," 226.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Sibylle Benninghoff-Lühl, "'Ach Afrika! Wäre ich zu Hause!,'" 85–9.

marrying African or mixed-race brides. Such wives could not make properly “German” homes, in the eyes of metropolitan colonial boosters, but they had agricultural skills and local connections that were clearly more valuable in the eyes of some male colonists.⁴⁷

In the eyes of colonial boosters, however, German housewives eclipsed any locally born settlers’ wives, therefore maintaining metropolitan domestic standards and thus Germanness within an African setting. The towns these colonials had founded resembled those of the homeland. Travel writers and novelists described German colonial towns laid out with straight, wide streets, clean public spaces, and homes in good repair, contrasting German settlements with “dirty” British-ruled Mombasa (in Kenya) and Zanzibar. In his 1900 survey of German colonies, *Auf deutschem Boden in Afrika*, Paul Kollmann compared German-ruled Dar-es-Salaam with British Zanzibar:

Viewed from the harbor, the city . . . gives the impression of a development of German villas . . . [with] pretty houses, built mainly of sparkling white lathe and plaster. . . . What a difference between Dar es Salaam and Zanzibar! Like day and night! . . . [in Zanzibar]. Everywhere dilapidated houses . . . everywhere dirt in the streets . . . in harsh contrast to what we see on *German* territory . . . *here* cleanliness prevails to the extreme; tree-lined streets, all the buildings with their decorative exteriors [and] solid and cozy furnishings.⁴⁸

Germans were not alone in using cleanliness, hygiene, and domestic order as markers to draw the boundary between themselves and their colonial subjects. European-style domesticity helped to define racial identity and justify European hegemony throughout the colonial world, as Ann Stoler and other historians have made clear.⁴⁹ But as the

⁴⁷ See O'Donnell, “The Colonial Woman Question,” 46–9.

⁴⁸ Paul Kollmann, *Auf deutschem Boden in Afrika. Ernste und heitere Erlebnisse* (Berlin, 1900), quoted in Warmbold, *Germania in Africa*, 158; italics in original. See Warmbold, 158–63 for other writers’ descriptions of the exceptional cleanliness of German colonies.

⁴⁹ See, e.g., Ann L. Stoler, “Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia,” in Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge. Feminist Anthropology in the Post-Modern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ann L. Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds., *Tensions of Empire. Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Margaret Strobel, *Western Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Burke, *Lifeboudy Men and Lux Women*; Hansen, *African Encounters with Domesticity*; and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History. British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture*,

comparison of British Zanzibar and German Dar-es-Salaam indicates, for many of those who wrote about or participated in German colonization in Africa, extreme cleanliness and a certain approach to domestic management signified not merely whiteness, but Germanness. Just as these writers would have agreed that within Europe, German homes were cleaner and better run than English homes, so too did they see German colonies as being characterized by superior hygiene.

Conclusion

Descriptions of domesticity abroad, which focused on both the private lives of foreigners (to draw comparisons with German family life) and on the housekeeping of colonial Germans (juxtaposed against the inferior domesticity of African cultures), abounded during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These descriptions were probably largely imaginary, telling us more about German stereotypes than about the actual housekeeping of non-Germans. German writers were doubtless overlooking, for example, the housekeeping of poor and rural women of their own culture (who lacked the servants, time for housework, and running water that many bourgeois urban housewives had), and instead blithely insisted that the household management of women in their nation surpassed that of other cultures, across the board.

Although they were indulging in sweeping generalizations, there is little doubt that the stereotypes such writers were propagating about the quality of German domesticity compared to that of foreigners had a certain currency in daily life and ordinary conversations, especially among the bourgeoisie. When such assumptions about foreign family life formed a backdrop to the actual day-to-day practices and norms of German domesticity described in Chapter 1, the net effect must have been to reinforce the imagined community of German housewives: the propensity of bourgeois housewives to define their own national identity using such gendered terms, and the tendency within German culture as a whole to construct a national identity that was partially rooted in domestic symbols and practices.

1865-1915 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994). In the United States, Protestant middle-class housewives also used the concepts of "clean" and "pure" to help define the role and image of white housewives in America, compared to "dirty" black or immigrant women. See Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt*, 16.

Certainly, the abundant assumptions about foreign domesticity helped to shape how German women thought of themselves *as housewives* compared to the women of other nations. The influence of such stereotypes is clear in an anecdote offered by Mrs. Sidgwick, the native German woman who married an Englishman. In 1908, she reported a conversation between two older well-off German women:

"My son Karl is in England," you hear a German mother say. "I am uneasy about him. I fear he may marry an Englishwoman. . . . It would break my heart. The women of that nation know nothing of housekeeping. They sit in their drawing rooms all day, while their husband's hard-earned money is wasted in the kitchen. . . . [An English wife] would give him cold mutton to eat, and he would die of indigestion"⁵⁰

The hypothetical English daughter-in-law gave Karl's mother a yardstick for understanding and evaluating her own housekeeping and, by extension, her own identity and worth.

Descriptions and stereotypes about the housekeeping of foreign women, and of German women in the colonies, must have reassured bourgeois German readers about the essential Germanness of such qualities as cleanliness, order, and well-organized household management. The persistence of symbols such as the linen cabinet in such depictions, and the broader domestic customs and practices they were linked to, showed how such characteristics allegedly were maintained, even in the African bush. In a general sense, the belief that cleanliness and order were "German" virtues had been growing in popularity since the eighteenth century, but the discussions of German domesticity presented were much more detailed and concrete in their layered descriptions of home life than earlier generalizations.⁵¹

These depictions of foreign housewives and of colonial German households thus could be, and were, used as a mirror by Germans at home, to reflect what they saw as the essence of their national

⁵⁰ Sidgwick, *Home Life in Germany*, 113–14.

⁵¹ See Münch, *Ordnung, Fleiss, and Sparsamkeit*, who traces how cleanliness, order, and thrift (which were seen as bourgeois values in earlier periods) were redefined as "German" virtues during the eighteenth century. Since then, Münch argues, these "virtues" have "helped to determine both the self-image of Germans and their impressions of others, in a unique fashion," 12–13.

character, and this character was often defined in gendered terms. Women – especially in their roles as housewives – served as vehicles for the expression and maintenance of German identity, an identity that was ostensibly pan-German in a global sense, although it was still implicitly urban and class-based. The appeal of this approach to defining Germanness may have been somewhat limited by its inherently bourgeois nature. But it was still much more successful than other Protestant bourgeois approaches to this problem (e.g., Sedan Day, or celebration of the Hohenzollern dynasty) because “German” domesticity was a basis for identity that could often transcend confessional and regional divisions.

The awareness of “German” housekeeping, contrasted with the inferior domesticity of other cultures, would be taken up and carried forward by Nazi theorists and policy makers. But in a quieter, more constant way, these assumptions about German domesticity helped to shape German national identity throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Sweeping the German Nation
*Domesticity and National Identity
in Germany, 1870–1945*

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