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# Through the Eyes of a Child

## The Child Metaphor and German Colonial Fantasies in Sabine Kuegler's Novel *Dschungelkind*

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The child metaphor can carry positive and negative connotations. The positive connotation suggests hope, imagination, and an idealised nostalgia, whereas the negative one is often used to characterise marginalised or underprivileged groups (the colonised or disabled). This study investigates the use of the child metaphor in Sabine Kuegler's *Dschungelkind*, which features as narrator a German child who grows up among the Fayu tribe in the Papuan jungle. The study shows that the text's use of childhood metaphors to depict the Fayu defies categorisation as entirely positive or negative. From the narrator's perspective, the metaphors she associates with the tribe are favourable. Analysis using Susanne Zantop's concept of German colonial fantasy, however, shows that the narrative portrays the German family as "father" figures to the indigenous people ("children") whom they educate. The Fayu are thus portrayed like other colonised societies, as children who need guiding to a civilised way of life.

**Keywords:** child metaphor, children's adventures, colonial fantasies, *Dschungelkind*, German-Indonesian relations, postcolonial

In literary and cultural studies, the term "child" often carries more than just a literal meaning, encompassing complex metaphorical associations and ideological functions, and shaping narratives, identities, and historical interpretations. The word "child"

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can represent notions of freedom, imagination, hope, and nostalgia for a lost fantasy world (Cecire et al., 2016). In German, "Kind", meaning "Child", can also symbolise innocence and victimhood, as argued by Susanne Baackmann (2022) in connection with German postwar literature and memory. In a less favourable context, however, "child" can also be used to denigrate particular groups that are perceived as falling short of contemporary societal values. China Mills and Brenda A. LeFrançois (2018) explain that the term "child-like" has functioned as a metaphor for various marginalised groups over the centuries, including racialised/colonised individuals and those with mental or physical disabilities. It has been used to subordinate particular groups and justify forms of multisystemic pressure that regulate those deemed "child-like" to suit the needs or preferences of those in power (Mills and LeFrançois 2018: 503).

The child metaphor is particularly significant in a colonial context, including in relation to German colonialism. Although Germany was not especially prominent as a colonial power, colonial fantasies and racial discrimination have persisted in German literature and culture (McGetchin 2020). These fantasies emerged as a result of Germany's position as something of a passive "observer" and "commentator" on the colonial arena. Like other European nations, and driven by a similar imperial ambition, Germany sought to assert its influence over foreign territories; but its colonial fantasies revolved around a portrayal of Germans as benevolent, wise, and ideal rulers, superior in all respects, and exemplifying moral greatness (Zantop 1997).

Susanne Zantop's research is a central reference point for studying colonial fantasies involving child metaphors. The author introduces two models of family-based metaphors: an educational or father–child relationship; and a marital relationship involving interracial marriages between German/European men and Indigenous women. In the educational model, fathers educate and prepare their children to be independent, and to stand alone when they are deemed ready. In contrast, the marriage model establishes a lasting relationship in which white men are integrated into the colonial territory and become entitled to all its benefits, even those transmissible to future generations (Zantop 1997). Both models reinforce the colonial fantasy of Germany as a harmonious colonial power or empire, in which German policies are well received by the local population.

German colonial fantasy spans different historical periods and extends beyond actual German colonies (Zantop 1997), taking in, and exhibiting an imagined control over, regions that were never formally colonised by the country. This colonial fantasy has been examined in several scholarly works, including studies on Southwest Africa (Laaksonen 2021), East Africa (Okafor 2013), North America (Grewling 2007), and South America (Simpson 2019; Zantop 1997). This study seeks to expand the exploration of German colonial fantasies into an area that has not yet been examined: the Asian region, and particularly Indonesia.

Germany's relationship with Asia, including Indonesia, has a distinctive historical background. The Romantic period witnessed the emergence of a particular perception of the Orient in Germany, influenced by the country's intricate national political

situation vis-à-vis Europe. National cohesion across the German-speaking territories was achieved much later than in other European countries. As Germany embarked on forging its own national identity, it was faced with assault by French revolutionary forces, and this prompted it to align itself with colonised nations. German intellectuals and philosophers sought alternative sources of national identity detached from classical and Western influences, finding resonances in the Oriental heritage of India. Notably, Friedrich Schlegel confidently proclaimed Germany as the European Orient (Germana 2010). The interaction between Germany and Asia unfolded primarily through scientific development, a hallmark of German identity amid the colonial endeavours pursued by other European nations (Cho 2018; McGetchin 2020).

The historical ties between Indonesia and Germany date back to the 16th century, long before the German ethnologist Adolf Bastian (1869) popularised the term "Indonesia" in his work *Indonesien oder Die Inseln des Malayischen Archipel* ("Indonesia or the Islands of the Malay Archipelago") (Seemann 2000). The German presence in Indonesia was facilitated by Dutch colonial activities. German scholars, doctors, priests, officials, and officers serving in the Dutch East Indies were involved in the genesis of German–Indonesian relations. The German community in the Dutch East Indies became the largest foreign community after the Dutch. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, significant travelogues and literary works focusing on Indonesia were produced by German scientists and writers.

However, the influx of Germans into Indonesia ceased during World War II, with the souring of relations between the Netherlands and Germany following Hitler's invasion. Despite the dwindling presence of the German community there, German enthusiasm for Indonesia continued, especially among children and teenagers. In *Hitler's Asian Adventure*, Horst Geerken (2015) highlights the significant emergence of Indonesian spaces in the early 20th century in children's books and adventure novels. Regions such as Java, Sumatra, Kalimantan, and Bali were portrayed in adventure or war narratives, leaving a lasting impact in the minds of German children and teenagers. Unfortunately, most of these adventure books have been lost or damaged, making them extremely difficult to locate (Geerken 2015).

Geerken's work inspired us to engage in a discourse on German young adult literature set in Indonesia, focusing specifically on Sabine Kuegler's *Dschungelkind*. This book, Kuegler's debut work, was published in 2005, and achieved bestseller status in Germany. In *Dschungelkind*, the author recounts joyful memories of her childhood and adolescence in the jungles of Papua, as well as the poignant cultural upheaval she experienced when she had to relocate to build a new life in Europe (Kuegler 2005). The book, popular in Germany, was adapted into a film, released in 2011. Kuegler herself went on to write *Ruf des Dschungels* (2007) and *Jaeger und Gejaegte* (2011), in which she extends her narrative beyond the Papuan forest to her life in Europe (Kuegler 2005, 2007, 2011).

Previous studies analysing *Dschungelkind* (book and film) have focused predominantly on the intersection of different cultures and identities (Ortakci 2019;

Probowati and Setiawan 2017; Ririn 2012; Tanjung 2013; Yang and Liyanti 2021). Other research into the book has covered linguistic investigations (Porayou 2017; Rahman et al. 2018), sociological enquiries (Pawening 2015), psychological examinations (Ummah 2015), and the topic of cultural competence (Hamanyuk 2018). A comprehensive exploration of the colonial fantasies that illuminate the behaviour of its German children in the remote jungles of Papua Indonesia – the focus of this paper – has yet to be undertaken. Nonetheless, several studies have investigated German colonial fantasies in children's and young adult literature more generally.

Nicole Grewling (2007) examines the topic through works for young adults by Friedrich Pajeken, highlighting how Germany's failure to establish itself as a successful colonial power influenced literary representations of children and young adult literature. In an effort to justify German colonial policies and assertiveness overseas, Pajeken portrays Native American characters in an extremely negative light. This depiction served to reinforce the notion that indigenous populations required strict education to attain civilisation; those who resisted were deemed justifiably subject to extermination (Grewling 2007).

Patricia Anne Simpson (2019) seeks to develop a framework for understanding how literary representations of childhood contributed to the emergence of German colonial fantasies around 1900. Her research also investigates how children's fiction constructs national identity through the lens of imperial experience. The findings show that the figure of the German child in colonial narratives is depicted as an heir to civilisation, possessing the survival skills necessary for navigating the wilderness. This reflects a racial pedagogy that reinforces notions of white supremacy and superiority. The dense Amazon rainforest of Brazil is reimagined as a traditional German forest, the backdrop for European-style childhood adventure and play. This narrative construction invites young readers to engage actively in the colonial imagination (Simpson 2019).

Both the aforementioned studies examine texts set in South America, a region never colonised by Germany. Moreover, though they focus on German colonial fantasies, they do not explore these specifically through the lens of the child metaphor. This study aims to fill this research gap by investigating colonial fantasies in Asia, particularly Indonesia, through an analysis of texts featuring German child protagonists.

The method employed in this study is textual analysis, with a specific focus on the postcolonial reading of Sabine Kuegler's *Dschungelkind*. Textual analysis allows for a deep exploration of how the language, symbols, and narrative structures in the text construct meaning, with a focus on the use of metaphors in the context of colonial discourse. The analysis is informed by two key theoretical lenses: the metaphor of the child and the fantasies of German colonialism. The different stages involve detailed readings of key sections of the text, where the "child" character is central to the narrative. Close attention is paid to direct descriptions, dialogues, and also subtextual meanings. The resulting interpretations are then interpreted within the context of Germany's colonial history, drawing on secondary sources to explore the use of the child metaphor, and its ideological underpinnings.

## Analysis

### *Nostalgic recall: self-identification and equal relations*

Kuegler's narrative is based on her childhood and adolescent experiences in the jungles of Papua. The interrelationship between storytelling and childhood memory in general deserves deeper scholarly attention. Maria Nikolajeva (2014) summarises the views of several scholars who argue that human long-term memory is inherently subjective, fragmented, and random. What people remember does not necessarily provide an accurate account of past events – if they actually occurred at all (Nikolajeva 2014: 91). Based on this argument, Kuegler's text, though rooted in lived experience, also represents a fictionalised narrative. The blending of real-life experiences and fiction constitutes a form of writing known as autofiction, "an explicitly hybrid form of life writing that merges autobiographical fact with fiction" (Gibbons 2017, as quoted in Bloom 2019).

Within autofictional texts, various narrative techniques can be used to shape the story. So a writer may present themselves as a minor character in a narrative that is not centred on them, thereby serving a testimonial function. Alternatively, the narrator may be positioned on the outside, recounting a history connected to themselves, their family, or their community, to reflect on post-conflict societies or contribute to cultural memory (Dix 2023). Kuegler's text, however, uses a first-person (*Ich*) narrator who is also the main protagonist, and can thus be categorised as an autodiegetic narrative. While the narrator and protagonist both represent the same individual, the character in the text does not necessarily provide an exact reflection of the real person, since certain narrative elements may have been adapted or fictionalised. This article seeks to maintain a distinction between Sabine Kuegler as the author and Sabine as a character within the narrative, using the name **"*Kuegler*"** when discussing the author, and **"*Sabine*"** when referring to the *Ich* figure and first-person narrator within the text.

Kuegler's use of autofiction and an autodiegetic narrator reinforces the authority and credibility of her narrator, strengthening the perception that the narrative is based on personal experience. The narrator's voice creates an empathy, persuading readers to accept the story as a truthful account. As a result, readers may become immersed in the narrative, and view it as an accurate recollection rather than a constructed memory. This highlights the importance of examining the narrator's identity to understand their relationship with the Fayu people and the power dynamics embedded within the text.

At the very beginning of the book, the narrator and the protagonist, Sabine, makes a striking statement about her position within the Fayu community (Kuegler 2005: 2):

> Im Verlorenen Tal, bei einem vergessenen Volk, war ich glücklich. Im Rest der Welt fühlte ich wie eine Verlorene.
> [In the Lost Valley, among a forgotten people, I was happy. In the rest of the world, I felt like a lost soul.][1]

[1] All the translations to English from the German text of the novel are by the authors of this paper.

Kuegler uses wordplay on "*verloren*" (lost) to create a compelling contrast. Within the "*Verlorenen Tal*", an isolated and "forgotten" place, far from the advancements of modern civilisation, Sabine finds happiness. Conversely, in the "*Rest der Welt*", referring to the modern world of Europe/Germany, she is "*eine Verlorene*", a lost soul, facing immense psychological pressure.

In the "*Rest der Welt*", Sabine experiences what Homi Bhabha (1992) terms "the "unhomely moment" – a state of disorientation resulting from displacement. However, this unhomeliness does not stem from physical expulsion or forced migration, but from enforced social adaptation, historical dislocation, and cultural relocation (Bhabha 1992: 141). Sabine's struggle with modern European life places her in a liminal space where her sense of self is destabilised.

According to Bhabha, the unhomely moment does not merely provoke nostalgia; it also generates an alternative world – not simply a return to the past, but a space of negotiation between histories, identities, and cultures. In Sabine's case, this alternative world is shaped by her memories of the jungle, which emerge as a response to her estrangement in Germany. Rather than serving as a passive retreat, these memories function as a negotiation of belonging, positioning her identity in an in-between space – neither fully European, nor entirely Fayu.

Within this context, the act of recalling childhood memories can be understood as a form of "nostalgic recall" – a literary mechanism through which Sabine re-engages with her past to redefine, rather than simply reinforce, her identity. Through this framework, Kuegler constructs childhood within the Fayu tribe as a counterpoint to European modernity, associating it with qualities such as innocence, authenticity, optimism, and freedom. Rather than being a mere rejection of European identity, however, Sabine's unhomely moment reflects the hybridity of her position – she is shaped by both worlds, yet fully at home in neither.

Kuegler's narrative of *Dschungelkind* begins with Sabine at 17, en route to Switzerland from Germany. Disoriented in what should feel like home, she is prompted to reflect on her blissful childhood experiences with the Fayu tribe in the Lost Valley. This shift between past and present underscores her psychological displacement, navigating the tensions of belonging and estrangement.

At the age of 7, Sabine, her mother, and her two siblings join her father to set up residence within the Fayu tribe. This passage marks both a physical transition and a symbolic entry into an unfamiliar world. The highly isolated nature of the Fayu tribe necessitated the use of a boat and, subsequently, helicopter for Sabine and her family to reach their settlement. Her initial encounter with the Fayu has a significant impact on Sabine, who has never previously met anyone as wild-looking as the members of the tribe. However, it does not take her long to acclimatise and feel at ease among the Fayu tribe, and she comes to enjoy life in the wilderness.

Sabine's childhood affinity for the forest suggests a link to the common perception of children as being closely connected to nature and the wilderness (cf. Lo 2016). It is often argued that children maintain a unique connection to the natural environment (Dobrin

and Kidd 2004), and they are frequently depicted as untamed or wild, representing a stage prior to the transition into the structured realm of adulthood (Moriarty 2018).

Sabine's nostalgic recollections of a childhood marked by joy and freedom in nature align with the metaphorical understanding of childhood as an idyllic period idealised and yearned for by adults. Her vivid depictions of life in the natural world resonate strongly with an important element in German national identity. German philosophers and writers of the Romantic period embraced the notion of the "soul of nature", a concept embodying the grandeur of nature and an aspiration for harmony with the natural world (Michułka 2017). Zechner (2017) explores the significant role of forests in shaping German national identity from the Romantic period to the Nazi era. After 1945, the ideological and political meanings imbued in the German forest became irrelevant. Nevertheless, Johannes Zechner argues that nature continues to hold profound meaning in German society, functioning both as a space for leisure and a focus for conservation. Media reports also suggest that the symbolic connection between German identity and nature remains deeply ingrained, particularly in the concept of *Waldeinsamkeit*, which expresses a spiritual bond with the forest (Connolly 2019; Deutsche Welle 2018; MacEacheran 2021). Though its meaning has evolved, the forest continues to influence German culture and heritage, showing that it remains a vital aspect of contemporary German identity. The deep-rooted appreciation of nature in German society may explain the book's popularity and its strong resonance with German readers.

Yet despite Sabine's profound connection with the Papuan wilderness, she remains influenced by civilisation. One episode offers a nuanced portrayal of the parallel existence experienced by the young Sabine while living in the jungle, revealing the complexity of her childhood environment and the two different worlds she inhabits. Despite being in the wilderness, Sabine and her siblings follow the process of maintaining their "civilised" European lives by attending home school. Similar to this story, the process of undertaking activities in the forest while continuing formal education is documented in a 1902 German almanac that Simpson (2019) examines. Simpson explores how the imperial experience is manifested in the play activities and daily life of the character Anita, a German child in the Brazilian forest. Anita must play her role as a good German by learning to read and write in order to be able to control and advance "civilisation". Although this almanac narrative was published in the early 20th century, the phenomenon it explores – the civilisational patterns encountered by German children within a wilderness setting – persists into the present day.

Living a parallel existence between two worlds is regarded as futile by the young Sabine. She harbours a strong aversion to leading a parallel life and bearing a dual burden. Having a profound affinity for nature, she sees little value in the "civilised" activities conducted in the jungle (Kuegler 2005:102). She firmly believes that her rightful place is within the untamed environment.

However, Sabine's bond with the untamed environment and her identification with the Fayu tribe face constraints and regulations as she transitions into adolescence. Her

father sets firm boundaries, urging her to gradually restrict her behaviour. The time for running wild has passed; adolescence is the time to mature and become a member of society, following the norms of a modern, civilised community.

As she approaches high-school age, Sabine and her siblings relocate to Jayapura for their education. Sabine revisits her beloved jungle every holiday, yet a sense of alienation pervades her experiences. While in her childhood she always believed she was part of the Fayu tribe, ambiguity arises during her adolescence, as she starts to question her position. This thematic focus emerged as a dominant thread in previous studies on *Dschungelkind* (Tanjung 2013; Yang and Liyanti 2021), reflecting a sustained scholarly interest in its core narrative concerns.

Finally, in the midst of an escalating identity crisis, exacerbated by the demise of a friend she considered a brother, she accepts an invitation to enrol in a Swiss boarding school, a symbol of advanced civilisation. The boarding school she enrols in is exclusively for the upper echelons of society.

Sabine's transition from childhood to adolescence is thus marked by a distinctive shift in environment, from the untamed jungle to an ethically demanding boarding school for the global elite. She is extricated from her wilderness roots to become a member of fashionable society. This transition causes Sabine significant distress, eventually necessitating her admission to a psychiatric hospital. Her formative experiences of freedom in the jungle and a simple life have a profound effect, leading her to view European civilisation as full of duplicity: adversaries who feign friendship, and friends who betray her trust.

Despite fluctuations in Sabine's self-perception and her relationship with the Fayu tribe, she maintains a steadfast connection with them. The narrative reveals her deeply rooted identification with the Fayu. Sabine's German appearance differs markedly from the physical attributes of the tribe, yet her self-perception aligns with the personality and mindset of the Fayu people (Kuegler 2005: 37):

> […] und hier, bei dem erst vor kurzem entdeckten Fayu-Stamm, der für Kannibalismus und eine unvorstellbare Brutalität stand, einem Stamm, der noch in der Steinzeit lebte und der eines Tages lernen würde zu lieben, statt zu hassen, zu vergeben statt zu töten, der Teil von mir wurde, wie ich ein Teil von ihm - hier änderte sich mein Leben. Ich war kein Deutsche mehr, war nicht mehr das weiße Mädchen aus Europa. Ich wurde eine Eingeborene, ein Fayu-Mädchen vom Stamm der Iyarike.
> [[…] and here, with the recently discovered Fayu tribe, known for cannibalism and unimaginable brutality, a tribe that still lived in the Stone Age and would one day learn to love instead of hate, to forgive instead of kill, that became a part of me, as I became a part of it—here, my life changed. I was no longer German, no longer the white girl from Europe. I became a native, a Fayu girl from the Iyarike tribe.]

Sabine's initial identification is unequivocal; she perceives herself as part of the Fayu tribe, despite their reputation for cannibalism and brutality. From her perspective, sincerity and purity exist beneath the violence displayed by the Fayu tribe, and will ultimately guide them towards love and forgiveness. Her challenging experiences and

disorientation in modern European life further solidify Sabine's admiration for the wisdom, purity, and sincerity found in the jungle.

Sabine offers an illustrative example of the wisdom of the Fayu tribal chief in his placing of Sabine's family home in a neutral zone. This strategic placement is intended to prevent any tribe from laying claim to Sabine's family. Sabine also carefully explains the differences inherent in the Fayu tribe, highlighting their distinctiveness without implying inferiority. Sabine vividly portrays how life in the jungle, while physically arduous, is spiritually enriching. This spiritual enrichment stands in stark contrast to life in Europe, which is physically comfortable but spiritually draining (Kuegler 2015: 52). Despite the constant warfare experienced by the Fayu tribe, there is a clear distinction between their allies and their adversaries; in Europe, Sabine often encounters duplicity, and this has a profound effect on her mental well-being. Sabine's retreat during her mental breakdown evokes memories of life in the jungle, particularly her fondness for the Fayu tribe, with whom she consistently identifies.

Her self-identification with the Fayu tribe is key to understanding how she positions them not as the Other, but as part of the Self. This positioning may seem to disrupt the conventional application of the child metaphor or child-like label to the Fayu tribe, deviating from the typical portrayal of native tribes in the context of German colonial fantasies. This metaphor is commonly attached to native tribes in a demeaning manner, to indicate that they have yet to meet the standards of maturity required by the norms of civilised society (Mills and LeFrançois 2018). This child-like representation is significantly shaped by power dynamics, where colonising groups see others as children in contrast to their own self-perceived status as adults.

Due to her own identification with the Fayu, Sabine's narrative does not show any such power dynamic. In her adult narrative, where Kuegler recalls childhood memories through the character of the young Sabine, she consistently regards the Fayu tribe as an extension of herself. Through a form of "nostalgic recall", Kuegler ascribes a positive connotation to the child-like nature she sees in the Fayu tribe, associating it with attributes of innocence, sincerity, hope, and freedom.

### *Political politeness: agency and hierarchical power relations*

Seen through Sabine's perspective of identification, the childhood metaphor used to depict the Fayu tribe and the associations it creates has profoundly positive connotations. However, a critical reading in the light of German colonial fantasies reveals the true nature of Sabine and her family's interactions with the Fayu tribe. The emphasis within German colonial fantasies on the idea of Germans as compassionate rulers, focused solely on advancing knowledge and cultural understanding in new territories (Cho 2020; McGetchin 2020), might suggest that Germany's colonial stance was apolitical. What this posture actually reflects, however, is Germany's political strategy for exerting influence over new territories or communities. The ostensibly equal relationship portrayed through Sabine's self-identification – a portrayal that aligns with the image of the apolitical German colonial "benevolent master" – does not hold true when scrutinised from the perspective of the agency positions within the narrative.

Narrative agency in the *Dschungelkind* story predominantly revolves around Sabine and her family. Sabine's fondness for the Fayu tribe and the Papuan jungle does not stem from any effort on the part of the tribe, but rather from the love and kindness of her and her family. There is a kind of moral grandeur embedded in Sabine and her family, instilled by her father (a missionary and linguistics expert) and her mother (a nurse), both of whom are remarkably humane and dedicated to the betterment of the indigenous tribes. An emphasis on benevolence, moral grandeur, and a humanistic approach was a defining characteristic of German intellectual traditions during the Enlightenment, and played a pivotal role in shaping Germany's nation-building process (Dewhurst 2013).

Sabine's strong moral upbringing underlies her own sense of agency, which plays a crucial role in her youthful engagement in the missionary efforts led by her father in the jungles of Papua. This is exemplified in a scene where Sabine and Bebe, a Fayu child, find the body of a deceased boy and engage in a discussion about religion. Bebe explains that he and the Fayu people recognise and believe in only one spiritual force – Tohre, the evil spirits ("*böse Geister*"). The Fayu attribute all events to Tohre, which leads them to live in a state of constant fear of malevolent forces. Disturbed by this belief system, Sabine seizes the opportunity to introduce Bebe to her own religious perspective (Kuegler 2005: 258–259). She articulates her belief in a sympathetic spirit, citing the existence of her family in the Papua jungle as evidence. According to Sabine, this spirit serves as a protector, consistently prevailing over evil and ensuring the safety of her family. Bebe, profoundly affected by this revelation, engages in a Fayu ritual by placing Sabine's finger in his mouth, symbolising a pledge of friendship and trust. Through this exchange, Sabine positions herself as an agent in the dissemination of religious teachings, securing the trust of the Fayu children, and establishing a significant role within the power dynamics of their interactions.

Another episode illustrative of Sabine's agency and kind nature is evident when, as a young girl, she first approaches the Fayu children and tries to integrate and engage with them (Kuegler 2005: 32, 41, 42):

> [...] langsam ging ich auf sie zu. Doch als ich mich näherte, fingen die Kinder an zu schreien, und die Frauen rannten zurück in den dunklen Wald.
> [[...] slowly, I approached them. However, as I got closer, the children began to scream, and the women ran back into the dark forest.]
>
> So stand ich und schaute und lächelte, aber niemand lächelte zurück. Nach einiger Zeit ging ich wieder zurück ins Haus [...].
> [So, I stood and watched and smiled, but no one smiled back. After a while, I went back into the house [...].]
>
> Wir versuchen sie mit Handzeichen zu überreden, mit uns zu spielen, aber niemand rührte sich. Schließlich gaben wir es auf und blieben unter uns.
> [We tried to persuade them with gestures to play with us, but no one moved. Eventually, we gave up and stayed among ourselves.]

In grounding the interpretation of characters' actions within the narrative, this analysis draws on insights from empirical psychology, and its examination of human behaviour in terms of social dynamics. So while this study primarily involves textual analysis, integrating psychological research offers a valuable framework for understanding how initiative in social interactions can influence perceptions of power and leadership. Such psychological references are relevant to literary analysis in general, as they can help to illuminate the implicit power structures within any narrative.

Analysing the situation from this psychological perspective, people who demonstrate initiative are frequently regarded as more competent and effective leaders (Kozlowski and Bell 2006; Latham and Locke 2007). The tendency to initiate interactions signifies confidence, openness, and camaraderie, and thus involves qualities that are often considered superior. However, the superior status of Sabine and her family is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, so its elucidation requires careful scrutiny.

Sabine seems to play a pivotal role not only in introducing childhood to the Fayu tribe but also in actively contributing to the establishment of childhood within the tribe. The incessant intertribal conflicts and strenuous conditions of jungle life prevent the Fayu children from experiencing childhood in a way similar to more "civilised" regions. The Fayu live in a constant state of tension and anxiety, which leads to a childhood that is far from the conventional notion of carefree playfulness. The Fayu children are portrayed as miniature adults, unfamiliar with conventional games, songs, or typical childhood activities (Kuegler 2005: 45). Nonetheless, they display remarkable survival skills, including the ability to make bows and arrows, build shelters, and identify safe and poisonous flora and fauna. However, it is important to approach this narrative with caution. Sabine's portrayal of childhood reflects a Western or modern urban perspective that has been deeply internalised within these cultural contexts.

The concept of the construction of childhood requires deeper examination. David Lancy's anthropological research highlights significant variations in the concept of childhood across different cultures, shaped by cultural values, social structures, and historical contexts (Lancy 2022). His work challenges the often-presumed universality of the Western perspective, which views childhood as a period of innocence, play, and dependency. Lancy demonstrates that in many non-Western societies, children are expected to contribute to household labour, develop their independence from an early age, or undergo structured rites of passage into adulthood. This perspective is crucial for understanding how the metaphor of childhood operates within colonial and postcolonial narratives, where depictions of innocence and dependency often reinforce unequal power relations between Western and non-Western societies.

In hunter-gatherer societies such as the Fayu tribe, there is no clear distinction between the activities of children and adults. From an early age, approximately two to three years old, children in these societies are integrated into tribal activities, actively participating in communal work, handling sharp tools, and performing daily household tasks (Human Relations Area Files n.d.). The childhood seen within the Fayu tribe should be understood as typical of a hunter-gatherer society. Although Sabine's

narrative, which critiques childhood experience among the Fayu, is motivated by her affection for the tribe and her intention to improve their well-being, it inadvertently reveals a significant colonial undertone.

Sabine's parents also possess a very strong agency position, although they refuse to take on power within the Fayu tribe. Sabine's father explicitly states that he does not want a leadership role, but positions himself instead as a servant, expressing his willingness to follow Chief Baou (Kuegler 2005: 95). The term "servant" is closely associated with missionaries, who are sent to assist. However, it is essential to examine the power relations and agency positions involved in this situation.

Although Sabine's family acknowledges their subordinate status to Chief Baou, the Chief permits them to reside in his territory without imposing any obligations. This behaviour reflects a reluctance to dominate that which does not belong to him, contrasting sharply with the concept of a civilisation that seeks to control and extend its dominion (Abdel Rahim 2015). Chief Baou's approach is also exhibited by other tribal leaders in Papua, such as the Asmat tribe, who prioritise group cohesion (Handaya 2021). The choice not to impose obligations on Sabine and her family signifies an endeavour to uphold group unity in the Fayu tribe. Sabine's family are permitted to proceed with their lives according to the values and norms associated with being German (although Sabine herself is profoundly shaped by the values of the Fayu tribe). Conversely, Sabine's family gradually exerts an influence on the Fayu tribe, introducing religious and compassionate values that shape their interpretation of life.

An essential image in the narrative illustrates how Sabine's family asserts their cultural framework upon Fayu tribal chiefs. The image shows Fayu tribal chiefs invited into the house for a meal, where they are served food and beverages at a dining table using plates, spoons, and glasses – an eating practice characteristic of European society. In this setting, the Fayu are expected to follow the dining etiquette of Sabine's household, reinforcing the home as a symbolic space that upholds Western cultural norms. Despite living in the Papuan jungle among the Fayu, Sabine and her family maintain a distinct space that even compels the tribal chiefs to conform to its customs. This underscores the family's strong position of cultural authority within the Fayu social dynamic.

The agency exercised by Sabine and her family is also evident in the realm of knowledge production, a defining characteristic of the German approach to colonialism. This emphasis on knowledge production, particularly evident in Sabine's text, is a central feature of the works of Karl May.

Karl May's writings hold significant importance within the German literary canon and have played a crucial role in shaping perceptions of "the Orient". His adventure novels, such as *Und Frieden auf Erden* (1904), which directly engage with Asia and Indonesia, exemplify this influence. May's works were instrumental in constructing the image of German protagonists as morally superior figures, and have significantly influenced German readers' perceptions of non-European regions. Through exoticised and romanticised portrayals of foreign cultures, May's narratives reinforce a colonial framework in which German protagonists assume the role of enlightened guides or

civilising agents. In a study of the role of his works in the German colonial enterprise, Dominika Ferens (2008) analyses the German characters in May's texts. She argues that the most striking feature of these figures is their exceptional nature. They are specifically portrayed as visiting newly discovered territories to explore new cultures and languages. Yet they are presented as already possessing a profound understanding of the culture, language, and geography of the regions they visit, surpassing even the locals in their knowledge. This suggests that "knowledge is a solid German product" (Ferens 2008: 97).

The knowledge production emphasised in Ferens's analysis is frequently intertwined with colonial endeavours. The control and dissemination of knowledge functions as a mechanism for asserting dominance over territories and populations. Indeed, European colonial powers strategically employed knowledge as an instrument of control and subjugation. While German colonial strategies are often regarded as distinct due to their emphasis on promoting knowledge and cultural understanding (Cho 2020; McGetchin 2020), and developing academic institutions and intellectual traditions (Marchand 2001), this view is now being increasingly challenged. Fuhrmann shows that in the nineteenth century, Germany leveraged economic and technical development to assert hegemony over Anatolia, despite not formally establishing it as a colony (Fuhrmann 2009). Similarly, Zimmerer and Beattie contend that knowledge production extends beyond academic pursuits, serving as a fundamental component in hegemonic colonial ambitions – a strategy later appropriated by the Nazi regime (Zimmerer and Beattie 2005). This perspective indicates that German academic activities, even when not explicitly tied to territorial conquest, played a crucial role in sustaining broader colonial structures. Germany's expertise, or "German knowledge", played a strategic role, enabling the dissemination of ideas and influence in other regions, without any formal political control.

The above explanation reveals the robust nature of the German colonial fantasy, in which the intellectual and moral superiority of Germans makes them not only accepted within but also indispensable to the local community (Ferens 2008). Although Sabine's father is not portrayed as having total knowledge of the territory visited, his knowledge is substantial enough to locate and discover the Fayu tribe, a group previously known only through legend (Kuegler 2005: 21).

The revelation that Sabine's father "discovered" the Fayu tribe suggests that he possessed not only knowledge but also remarkable social and communicative skills, surpassing even the local Papuans. This points to the superiority of the German figures' knowledge and characterises them as solid Germans. Sabine herself embodies this portrayal by assuming the roles of explorer and guardian. While her father is credited as the discoverer of the Fayu tribe, Sabine is recognised as the creator of the "normal/western" children's realm within the tribe. Although the distinction involved is subtly masked by a narrative imbued with respect and egalitarianism, the portrayal of Sabine and her family as compassionate masters is ultimately highlighted.

This configuration is further reinforced through the metaphor of childhood, which operates along a shifting semantic axis within the narrative. Initially, the Fayu

are associated with positive attributes such as innocence, naturalness, and emotional authenticity, supporting Sabine's attempt to create a sense of identification and closeness. In this context, the child metaphor functions as a vehicle of empathy. However, this positive framing gradually gives way to more conventional childlike metaphors within a colonial context, including immaturity, dependency, and limited knowledge. By portraying the Germans as compassionate masters, the narrative simultaneously represents the Fayu as requiring guidance, thereby reinstating a hierarchical relationship. The metaphor of childhood as applied to the Fayu, therefore, does not remain stable but evolves from an apparently egalitarian trope into a mechanism that legitimises asymmetrical power relations.

### *The father–son dynamic and the colonial legacy*

The portrayal of Sabine and her parents as knowledgeable and benevolent masters is linked to their wisdom. As noted above, Sabine's family is not subjected to any obligations imposed by the Fayu tribe, and they show respect for the customs, culture, and rules established by the Fayu tribal chief. They always prioritise dialogue.

Although a very different power dynamics is involved, the principles of attentive listening and care demonstrated by Sabine's parents exhibit structural parallels to the rhetoric employed by General Theodor Leutwein during the initial phase of German colonisation in Africa. Leutwein sought to integrate the voices and perspectives of the indigenous Nama and Herero peoples, framing his administration as a process of negotiation and accommodation. However, this approach remained deeply embedded within a colonial framework and ultimately functioned as an instrument of imperial control. His successor, Lothar von Trotha, dispensed with any semblance of dialogue, instead implementing an extermination policy – signalling a shift towards explicit colonial violence and a departure from the idealistic facade that had initially informed German colonial fantasy (Laaksonen 2021).

The benevolence and bravery of Sabine and her family are underscored by their service to the primitive Fayu tribe. Unlike the Nama and Herero tribes of Africa, a significant number of whom were familiar with writing systems and Christianity (Laaksonen 2021), the Fayu tribe were a brutally cannibalistic community. Their way of life seemed frozen in the Stone Age (Kuegler 2005: 37).

The Fayu tribe existed in a state of isolation, unaffected by modernity. They lived without clothing, dwelt in open-air structures without walls, relied on hunting for sustenance, and maintained a nomadic way of life, relocating in response to resource depletion and returning once nature had replenished itself. The portrayal of the Fayu tribe as still living in the Stone Age is intriguing, especially given the specific use of this term to categorise the Papuan people. Anthropologist Danilyn Rutherford (2018), who specialises in Papua, Indonesia, has explored the concept of colonial fantasy. She discusses the Western perception of Papuans as backward and living "as if" they were in the Stone Age. She argues that colonial practices aimed to depict and maintain an image of Papuan backwardness in order to justify the supposed importance of a Western

presence in civilising and helping the Papuan people. This colonial fantasy continues to the present day, hindering the Papuan people's efforts to shed the image of being a backward group (Rutherford 2018).

However, Sabine presents a pattern that diverges from the colonial practices outlined by Rutherford. Sabine's description of the Fayu tribe learning to love and forgive rather than harbouring hatred and engaging in violence signifies the success of her family in educating the Fayu. They gradually guide the tribe away from their Stone Age existence, challenging the myth that portrays the Papuan people as "backward". Sabine's family introduces a new system that emphasises the values of goodness. According to Zantop's theory, the relationship that emerges is an educational one, similar to that between father and child. Sabine's family takes on the role of father figure to the Fayu tribe, transmitting cultural norms of goodness and affection that promote a peaceful life and facilitate their progression beyond the Stone Age.

In Kuegler's text, however, this dynamic becomes more complicated when examined from the perspective of Sabine as child protagonist. The relationship between Sabine's family – particularly her father and mother – and the Fayu tribe distinctly mirrors a *father–son* dynamic. Her parents assume the role of educators and mentors to the Fayu, who are depicted as severely underdeveloped (Kuegler 2005: 37). Significantly, Kuegler's narrative lacks closure. In the final pages of the first book, Sabine describes the transformation of the Fayu into a peaceful tribe (Kuegler 2005: 363). While she attributes these changes to the Fayu's own determination and efforts, she highlights her father's efforts in directing the Fayu on this course of action. This focus on guidance points to the enduring influence of the German colonial fantasy in shaping the development of the Fayu in the remote jungles of Papua.

This analysis shows how power dynamics, though seemingly absent due to Sabine's self-identification with the Fayu, become apparent when the narrative is examined in relation to German colonial fantasy. Through close textual analysis, it becomes evident that Kuegler's narrative, while deeply personal, cannot be separated from broader colonial and postcolonial discourses. Kuegler's self-positioning within the Fayu tribe, while framed as an immersion into a premodern world, ultimately constructs a narrative where the Western subject retains control over meaning-making. This reflects Mill's (2022) argument that the child figure in postcolonial narratives often serves as a liminal subject, navigating between cultures but reinforcing underlying hierarchies. With its emphasis on the ideals of benevolence and knowledge dissemination, this colonial construct is deeply embedded in the narrative.

Sabine's identification with the Fayu must be understood as fundamentally ambivalent. While it appears to signal a crossing of cultural boundaries and an adoption of the Fayu perspective, it ultimately serves to rearticulate existing hierarchies rather than dismantle them. This ambivalence resides in the dual function of identification: it produces a sense of proximity while simultaneously enabling control. This dynamic is reinforced by Sabine's autodiegetic narrative position, which functions as the central mediating instance through which the Fayu are represented. As both narrator and

protagonist, she occupies a privileged position from which she not only recounts events but also interprets and frames the Fayu world. This narrative authority is particularly significant in a colonial context, as it allows her to shape the shifting representations of the Self and the Other while retaining epistemic control. Even when the narrative adopts a tone of intimacy or identification, the autodiegetic structure ensures that the Fayu remain objects of narration rather than subjects of their own voice. Consequently, Sabine and her family are positioned as epistemic authorities. Thus, rather than simply oscillating between subversion and reinforcement of colonial power, the text mobilises this ambivalence as a narrative strategy that renders such power less visible, more affective, and therefore more enduring.

This endurance becomes particularly evident when the text is situated in its historical context. Although *Dschungelkind* was published in 2005, it continues to reflect and reinterpret earlier colonial discourses, demonstrating the persistence of colonial ideology in Germany beyond the formal colonial period. In this sense, the narrative exemplifies how such ideological mechanisms remain operative, reinforcing Germany's involvement in colonial structures not only during its imperial expansion but also through later cultural narratives that sustain and rearticulate its colonial legacy.

## Conclusion

In *Dschungelkind*, two contrasting perspectives shape the metaphor of a child. The Fayu tribe is portrayed not as "the Other" but as an extension of "the self", with their childlike traits – innocence, sincerity, hope, and freedom – imbued with positive connotations. This creates an illusion of egalitarianism, masking the hierarchical power dynamics between Sabine's family and the Fayu. Through the lens of German colonial fantasy, however, a different narrative emerges: Sabine's family assumes the role of benevolent guides leading the Fayu towards progress, and subtly reinforcing soft colonisation. Rooted in ideals of benevolence and knowledge expansion, German colonial fantasy serves as a key framework for revealing the implicit colonial structures embedded in the text.

This analysis contributes to broader discussions on the persistence of German colonial ideology in contemporary cultural production, particularly in literature depicting intercultural encounters in non-colonised regions. Though Germany's formal colonial rule ended in the early twentieth century, colonial fantasies endure in literature and other media, shaping public perceptions. The portrayal of indigenous communities as naïve, childlike, and dependent on European guidance mirrors historical colonial rhetoric. By exposing how *Dschungelkind* perpetuates these tropes, this study highlights the lasting influence of colonial discourse on representations of indigenous communities.

These findings open avenues for further research. Similar tropes in other postcolonial literature or travel narratives could be examined, particularly in contemporary German works engaging with colonial history. Comparative analyses with British and French narratives might reveal transnational patterns in sustaining colonial ideology. Studies on

film adaptations and visual media could also provide insights into how these narratives are reinforced or challenged through different storytelling mediums. Beyond literature and media, further research could explore how German colonial fantasy continues to shape political, humanitarian, and international discourse, particularly in regions never colonised by Germany. Investigating these areas would deepen understanding of the persistence and evolution of colonial narratives in modern contexts.

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## Gledano dječjim očima

### Dijete kao metafora i njemačke kolonijalne fantazije u romanu *Dschungelkind* Sabine Kuegler

Dijete kao metaforička figura može nositi pozitivne ili negativne konotacije. Pozitivne konotacije upućuju na nadu, maštu i idealiziranu nostalgiju, dok se negativne često pojavljuju pri kategorizaciji likova koji pripadaju marginaliziranim ili diskriminiranim skupinama (npr. osobe podčinjene kolonizatorima ili osobe s invaliditetom). U ovom se radu istražuje pojava djeteta kao metafore u romanu Sabine Kuegler *Dschungelkind* u kojem je pripovjedač djevojčica iz Njemačke koja odrasta među pripadnicima plemena Fayu u papuanskoj džungli. Izbjegavajući jednostrane kategorizacije (pozitivne ili negativne), u romanu se simbolika djetinjstva primjenjuje za prikaz Fayua. Djevojčičin lik u ulozi pripovjedača s plemenom povezuje povoljne, pozitivne konotacije. Međutim, analiza koja se oslanja na koncept njemačke kolonijalne fantazije Susanne Zantop pokazuje da ova pripovijed prikazuje članove njemačke obitelji kao „očinske" figure u odnosu na autohtono stanovništvo („djecu") koju obrazuju. Zbog toga su Fayui u cjelini romana ipak prikazani poput drugih koloniziranih društava, kao djeca kojoj je potrebno vođenje prema civiliziranomu načinu života.

**Ključne riječi:** dječje pustolovine, *Dschungelkind,* kolonijalne fantazije, metafora djeteta, njemačko-indonezijski odnosi, postkolonijalizam