

**SPEAKING IN TONGUES:  
A STUDY OF MARY KINGSLEY'S DISCOURSE  
IN *TRAVELS IN WEST AFRICA***

KAREN BENNETT

Universidade Católica, Pólo de Viseu

Mary Kingsley, as author and as person, has always defied categorisation. The very circumstances of her birth – her father married his housekeeper<sup>1</sup> – placed her on the margins of English society, and it may be that this fact conditioned her apparent reluctance to allow herself to be wholly appropriated by any social group or stereotype, be that Victorian spinster and Imperialist, or proto-feminist and ‘nigger-lover’. Consequently, she has aroused very ambivalent reactions, in her own time as more recently<sup>2</sup>. Unsurprisingly, this reaction has been particularly acute when the critical perspective is one of ideological conviction, such as recent attempts by feminists and post-colonialists to recruit her to their cause. Her discourse, which sometimes seems so charmingly to anticipate more modern attitudes, at other times wallows about in the patriarchal and imperialist prejudices of the Victorian establishment; and her ‘rescuers’ are left high-and-dry, bemusedly muttering about incoherence and ‘resistance to the lexicon of self-discovery’<sup>3</sup>.

If peripheral status left Mary Kingsley with an ill-defined sense of identity, it also endowed her with a fluidity of perspective that is

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<sup>1</sup> The importance of this transgression in Victorian society cannot be underestimated. Dawes (1989. pp47-50) recounts the story of a respectable Victorian gentleman, Arthur J. Munby, barrister, poet and civil servant, who fell in love with and married his servant, maintaining the liaison a secret throughout his life, so afraid was he of the consequences should he be found out. ‘Society would not allow them to break down the barriers that divided class from class. Hannah refused, like the heroine of *Pygmalion*, to become a *lady*, and Munby knew that if he made his marriage known to his family and the world at large he would be completely cast out.’

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Lawrence (1994: p129): ‘The interest of Kingsley’s ambiguous status in relation to the dominant culture’s imperial ethos increases when one looks at the way her writings were appropriated by political and intellectual figures of radically divergent views, such as J.A. Hobson and Michael Davitt on the one hand, and Rudyard Kipling, on the other.’

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence (1994:p128)

undoubtedly a valuable asset for anyone with literary, scientific or political ambitions. To all effects, it would seem that Mary Kingsley had all three; for following her return from West Africa, she became extremely active in all kinds of areas, writing and lecturing on subjects of general and specialist interest, and campaigning about a variety of different issues such as the liquor traffic debate and the 'hut tax' controversy. Whether her motivation was a deeprooted belief in the rightness of her 'causes', desire for fame, or simply a way for an unmarried, otherwise 'useless' woman to make use of her considerable energies, is unclear. Whatever the reason, she was amply aided by her ability to think herself into other worldviews, a skill which she frequently made use of to both break down the barriers dividing people from each other, and to subvert some of the more stubborn establishment perspectives.

In this paper, I will be especially concerned to examine the ways in which Mary Kingsley relates to themes of gender and empire in her book *Travels in West Africa*. I do not approach this as an exploration of her personal identity, as some critics have done (since it is naïve to assume that opinions expressed by a narrative voice are necessarily in line with those of the author as person); rather I am concerned with looking at the ways in which Kingsley uses conventional discourse to create an effect in her intended readers. But first, we need to examine what in fact 'discourse' is.

### **Discourse**

The term 'discourse' has become common currency in many different disciplines in recent years, and unfortunately, it is often left undefined. Sara Mills, in her book *Discourse*, has attempted to make sense of this terminological confusion, by laying out some of the main developments of the word. She begins by examining the various dictionary definitions available (the etymological root is Latin *discurrere*, meaning a running to and fro) and moves on to specialist usages, concentrating upon the meanings attributed to it in Cultural/Critical/Literary Theory, Mainstream Linguistics, Social Psychology and Critical Linguistics, and, of course, Discourse Theory.

I will be concerned here with Discourse in the sense that it is defined in Critical Language Study, as social practice determined by social structures. As Norman Fairclough describes in *Language and Power* (pp.17-42), the term was adopted to replace the traditional Saussurean distinction between 'langue' and 'parole', as these were felt to inadequately account for the historical specificity of language use and

the power relations that inevitably undercut any interaction. The term 'discourse' collapses the distinction between the ideal social form of a language ('langue') and the individual manifestation of it ('parole'), since all language use is conceived of as socially determined.

*'Linguistic phenomena are social in the sense that whenever people speak or listen or write or read, they do so in ways which are determined socially and have social effects. Even when people are most conscious of their own individuality and think themselves to be most cut off from social influences – 'in the bosom of the family', for example – they still use language in ways which are subject to social convention. And the ways in which people use language in their most intimate and private encounters are not only socially determined by the social relationships of the family, they also have social effects in the sense of helping to maintain (or, indeed, change) those relationships.'* (Fairclough, 1989: p.23)

Consequently, any analysis of a stretch of text or dialogue needs to take into account the underlying conventions ('orders of discourse', in Michel Foucault's terms) that determine it. This has led to a certain ambiguity: it may refer to what someone has said or written on a particular occasion (eg. Mary Kingsley's discourse in the *Travels*), or what is habitually done in such a situation (the discourse of travel writing, of colonialism, of femininity etc). As Fairclough points out (*idem* p28), this ambiguity is felicitous, since it helps to underline the social nature of discourse, by suggesting that the individual practice always implies social conventions.

### ***Travels in West Africa as Travel Writing***

An analysis of Mary Kingsley's discourse, if it is to determine to what extent she subverts or subscribes to dominant patterns, needs to be systematically set against the conventions within which she was working, and this implies first and foremost a consideration of genre. This is a very important question, since it sets the framework for our interpretation. A genre, like any other socially-constructed category, implies boundaries, choices, inclusions and exclusions, and our reading is likely to be very different if the text is taken as autobiography, travelogue or as work of ethnography, for example. Most critics have chosen to consider it as Travel Writing, (or more specifically as the sub-genre of Women's Travel Writing), and it has been pitted against other examples of this genre, as well as against female and colonial discourse in general. To my mind, the most satisfying examination of the *Travels* from this perspective has been done by Sara Mills in *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of*

*Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*', in which she discusses at length some of the constraints operating on this kind of discourse and how they could have affected the author's choices. Her conclusion is:

*'Kingsley's text, rather than being a "feminine" text or a "colonial" text or for that matter a "feminist" text, seems to be caught up in the contradictory clashes of these discourses one with another. No stable position can finally be given to the text.'* (Mills, 1991: p175)

Similar conclusions are reached by Karen Lawrence in *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition*, and Alison Blunt in *Travel, Gender and Imperialism: Mary Kingsley and West Africa*, which, as their titles suggest, approach the work from a similar perspective. It would seem, therefore, that the perspective has to a large extent conditioned the interpretation.

It may be reasonable to assume that a more coherent interpretation might be achieved if the frame of reference were altered, and to a certain extent, this is what Dea Birkett has done in her essay 'Mary Kingsley and West Africa'. Instead of pitting the work against modern feminist and post-colonial theories, she has attempted to read the author on her own terms, in the light of the various issues and opinions that were current at the time. Interestingly, the picture that most strongly emerges is of a woman whose private identity is in conflict with a public façade she has been obliged to assume:

*'While on the public platform Kingsley appeared as the professional politician, in private she felt more and more drawn to the Africa she had left behind. Whilst maintaining professional façade of feminine conformity, in the privacy of her Kensington home she decorated her rooms with souvenirs from her journeys... and jangled about in African bangles. To a childhood friend she wrote of the stresses of her two personalities, the public politician and the private African...'* (Birkett, 1990: p.183)

That this conflict between the private and the public might equally apply to Kingsley's discourse as to her style of dress, and that such a conflict might well account for some of the inconsistencies noted in her approaches to issues of genre and race, has been given minimal attention by the critics. Alison Blunt claims that there is a tension inherent in Travel Writing in this respect, but assumes that it is a simple binary distinction arising from the experiential nature of the subject-matter, and fact that the subject under scrutiny is the author's own self:

*'According to Foucault, the author-function split in the eighteenth or nineteenth century, when scientific discourse came to legitimize anonymity in*

*the quest for "truth". In contrast, literary discourse came to stress the importance of the author to an unprecedented degree. In light of this claim, travel writing seems distinctive because of the ways its content often seem to bridge such a divide, as well as the way in which the author as narrator is also the traveller' (1994: p59).*

Wells describes the pressures upon women to produce private confessional types of discourse, and claims that many of the journals and letters that were published by women in the 19<sup>th</sup> century were attempts to channel their creative energies into a genre that was acceptably feminine:

*'It is assumed that the texts are simply reproductions of journals or letters to families, whereas, in many of the cases the women wrote the texts in the form of journals because that was the convention of the times. Many of them had not kept journals and therefore the journals are fictional inventions after the fact.'* (1991:p110)

But this contrasts with the evidence that Mary Kingsley's *Travels* really was put together from letters and diaries, and that she, on the contrary, felt herself to be under pressure to relinquish the diary form. Alison Blunt, in a footnote to Chapter 2, tells us that Kingsley found it necessary to justify including extracts from her diary,

*"...being informed on excellent authority that publishing a diary is a form of literary crime. Firstly, I have not done it before, for so far I have given a sketchy resumé of many diaries kept by me while visiting the region I have attempted to describe. Secondly, no one expects literature in a book of travel. Thirdly, there are things to be said in favour of the diary form, particularly when it is kept in a little known and wild region, for the reader gets therein notice of things that, although unimportant in themselves, yet go to make up the conditions of life under which men and things exist".* (Kingsley cit. Blunt, 1994: p88)

I would hold that the problems that have been found in analysing Mary Kingsley's discourse in this work are directly due to the fact that the book has been patched together from a series of different discourses, and that unless we make an effort to separate them, we will be left with the notion of a schizophrenic narrator with no fixed identity at all. There is an unreconcilable gap between the private style of a diary entry or letter, for example, and the public voice of an ethnologist speaking the objective language of science; and yet both of these voices are unmistakably present in the *Travels*. Consequently, it would seem to me that a consideration of this text from the perspective of any single genre is doomed to failure, even when the

boundaries of that genre may be firmly established (as is clearly not the case for the Travelogue).

### **A Patchwork of Discourses**

Although it is reasonable to assume that parts of texts prepared for other purposes may have found their way into the final script of the *Travels* (Kingsley was in great demand as a lecturer at institutions as diverse as the Cheltenham Ladies College, the Manchester Chamber of Commerce and the Royal Geographical Society, and published many written articles in many different kinds of publication), the overwhelming evidence for this interpretation comes from a close study of the text itself. The undisputable differences in style between various sections of the book clearly suggest that Kingsley was writing for different audiences at different times, and that she adapted her subject matter and voice to suit the conventions of a series of different genres.

As any professional writer knows, narratorial voice is no more fixed than the clothes one puts on in the morning. It is a measure of Kingsley's communicative competence<sup>4</sup> that she is able so deftly to vary her style in accordance with the occasion, and no analysis of her discourse can be thorough unless it takes into account the different 'orders of discourse' operating on each of the styles in turn. Consequently, my approach to Kingsley's text is to firstly isolate some of the different discourses that I consider to be present in the *Travels*, and to analyse them in the light of conventional models. Assuming that style is dependent upon factors such as the purpose of the text and the relationship of writer to reader, I will then attempt to establish to what extent Kingsley subverted or subscribed to the dominant modes of discourse in each case.

Particular attention is given to the parts played by narrator and narratee, which are understood to be discursive roles<sup>5</sup> quite independent from the substantial reality of the person who created them. It is assumed that we do not have access Mary Kingsley's raw perceptions and responses, and that it is therefore futile to attempt to

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<sup>4</sup> This term, coined by Dell Hymes in 1977, refers to 'the ability not only to apply the grammatical rules of a language in order to form grammatically correct sentences but also to know when and where to use these sentences correctly and to whom' (Richards, Platt and Platt, 1992: 65). It thus added to Chomsky's notion of Linguistic Competence the aspect of social appropriateness, implying awareness of social roles and settings, and a knowledge of how the language is conventionally used in different situations.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Onega and García Landa (Ed.) 1996:p10.

establish what she thought or believed about anything, as some critics have sought to do. For even in the sections of the text that appear to be the most private, such as those that I have labelled the 'on-the-spot diary jottings', the very act of expressing perceptions in language implies some kind of compromise with conventional forms of thought<sup>6</sup>. When, in addition, there is a narratee present, as is the case of all other-centred discourses from the private letter to the scientific paper, the authorial voice becomes even more self-conscious and constructed, and progressively more removed from any pre-linguistic 'self' that might be said to exist<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, it is only by taking into account the constraints operating upon each type of discourse that it will be possible to assess whether Mary Kingsley sought to subvert or support the dominant systems.

### **Narrative Levels**

I have isolated essentially five narrative levels intrinsic to Mary Kingsley's own text. The division has been done chiefly on the basis of the narratee, and for this option I am very much indebted to the essay 'Introduction to the Study of the Narratee' by Gerald Prince (in Onega & García Landa. 1996). The narratee is rarely explicit, but a careful analysis of style reveals the presence of a persona to whom the narrator addresses herself<sup>8</sup> and who conditions many of the linguistic

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<sup>6</sup> In order for us to articulate our experience in a way that others will understand, we are obliged to make use of existing linguistic categories, and these are necessarily rife with the prejudices and injustices particular to our speech community. Consequently, a perception that once might have been fresh and innovative, becomes sullied as it passes through the familiar corridors of language. Edward Said (1978 p155) describes this process very well in his passage about Karl Marx: 'That Marx was still able to sense some fellow feeling, to identify even a little with poor Asia, suggests that something happened before the labels took over... It is as if the individual mind (Marx's in this case) could find a precollective, preofficial individuality in Asia – find and give in to its pressures upon his emotions, feelings, senses – only to give it up when he confronted a more formidable censor in the very vocabulary he found himself forced to employ. What that censor did was to stop and then chase away the sympathy...The vocabulary of emotion dissipated as it submitted to the lexicographical police action of Orientalist science and even Orientalist art. An experience was dislodged by a dictionary definition...'

<sup>7</sup> The existence of any kind of pre-linguistic self, unified or not, is of course controversial in the light of post-modernist theories of the fragmentation of the subject.

<sup>8</sup> Or 'himself', since it could be argued that some of the narratorial roles that Mary Kingsley adopts may be considered as masculine within the accepted parameters of the day. Blunt (1994:p.61) informs us that Kingsley's publisher, Macmillan, 'initially interpreted her voice as masculine in tone, with Kingsley indignantly responding, "I do not understand what you mean by 'the story being told by a man.' Where have I said it was?"' Nevertheless, I have chosen to use the

choices made. In particular, the type of knowledge assumed (use or omission of ellipsis, and cohesive devices that reveal what is new information and what is taken as given) provides valuable hints as to the character of the narratee, as well as the style and tone adopted.

The five main narrative levels are given below. There may well be more; in particular, the central bands (2b, 3 and 4) could be subdivided, for example, if evidence was provided to distinguish between different narratees.

They are:

- 1) *Diary*: Despite the fact that Kingsley claimed to have made extensive use of her diaries in the production of the Travels, there are a few passages which clearly reveal traits of the original diary style. Those that do can be sub-divided into two types, the jottings that were made 'in situ' to record thoughts and impressions before they were forgotten, and the more reflected entries that were obviously composed at leisure, perhaps in the evening after the day's activities were over:
  - a) *'On-the-spot' diary jottings*: these we would expect to be the most formless of all, a series of perceptions destined originally for no other narratee but herself. Consequently, the narrator will be as unconstructed a private self as it is possible to reveal through language<sup>9</sup>. We expect the style to be a kind of unstructured 'stream-of-consciousness' style, essentially subjective, consisting of isolated words and phrases unlinked by any formal syntax or making use of a simple co-ordinated sentence structure. It is likely to be predominantly in the present tense, and to reveal deictic features referring to the immediate context (eg. 'here', 'now', 'yesterday' etc).
  - b) *Reflected diary entries*: quite a different diary style is created when the entry is written after the experience, upon reflection. For at this point, it ceases to be innocent; there is an awareness of itself as a text that will be read (if only by herself), and consequently the

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feminine pronoun when referring to all of Kingsley's narrators, simply because of the ease of using a single form instead of the more clumsy non-gender-specific alternatives.

<sup>9</sup> As the quotation from Edward Said (cf. Footnote 6) reveals, the moment we start to use language, we begin to construct ourselves and our relation to the world outside. Consequently, we do not have access to Mary Kingsley's unformed, pre-linguistic world view. Nevertheless, diary jottings may be considered to be the closest to this that it is possible to get.

narrator begins to adopt a self-conscious stance and consciously form her sentences. The style becomes more organised, although the syntax would still be subjective, unelaborate and relaxed, and we might expect a predominance of present perfect and past tenses (recounting the day's activities).

- 2) *Personal correspondence*: We know that Kingsley entered into correspondence with a series of different friends, and it is reasonable to claim that some of the phrases and sections of text that eventually found their way into the *Travels* may have been originally formulated as a narrative to a friend. Stylistically, this is unlikely to be very different from the 'reflected diary entries', although there may be an additional phatic function to the text and a conscious effort to inform and/or entertain. It is still likely to be fairly informal and subjective, yet well-structured (a Victorian authoress would never have allowed her prose to go out naked, even to a close friend). The presence of a narratee that is different from herself would naturally mean that the prose is slightly more distant (with irony perhaps) and the narrator-persona more constructed. (It is not clear who exactly the original narratee was, and there may have been several different ones; nevertheless, it is safe to assume that they are British and of a similar class and outlook as herself).
- 3) *Light-hearted talks*: Upon her return from West Africa, Mary Kingsley was invited to give lectures to a wide variety of different audiences, and some of the passages of the *Travels* would seem to reveal traits of having been prepared with this purpose in mind. At the lighter end of the spectrum, (such as the talks she delivered to the Cheltenham Ladies College), she would have been expected to have adopted a tone that was entertaining and informative, but not too demanding; and to make extensive use of anecdote. Consequently we expect the use of a subjective style (use of personal pronouns, modals etc), narrative tenses (past simple, past perfect, past continuous) narrative organisation (essentially chronological) and perhaps some echo of the discourse of her narratee in order to provide points of connection and contrast.
- 4) *More serious talks*: here I consider the kinds of talks she gave at institutions such as the Manchester Chamber of

Commerce and the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institute, which would imply an audience made up largely of men (one assumes) who are educated and informed, yet non-specialist. Here, her purpose is not only to inform and entertain, but also to be accepted intellectually; hence, we can expect her to assume the role of lecturer (an intelligent and informed professional who has a sense of humour and is emotionally responsive), and to create a style that is more elaborate and formal than in the preceding levels, assuming a greater knowledge on the part of her audience. As a kind of hybrid genre, it may contain elements of styles 3 and 5.

- 5) *Scientific paper*: Finally, there were the articles and lectures she prepared for specialist circles such as the Royal Geographical Society, where her audience were specialists in ethnology, botany and zoology. In order for her to be accepted in these rigorous scientific circles, she needed to speak the jargon (just as any academic who wishes to be published in a scientific journal needs to do today). Sections of the text originally destined for this readership may be expected to be formal and technical, elaborate syntactically, with all the characteristics of scientific style such as impersonality (achieved through structures such as the passive voice, verbal constructions with ‘it’, absence of modals or any other device revealing the subjectivity of the author etc), denotative use of language, and an erudite vocabulary. The textual organisation is also likely to be formal.

Finally, there is the additional complication of the editing. This book could be said to have been effectively edited at least three times, firstly by Mary Kingsley herself (the sewing together of the ‘patchwork’ pieces), then by Macmillan<sup>10</sup>, her publisher, and finally by Dent in this more modern edition. The fragmented nature of the text has thus been compounded; passages of the ‘original’ work have been omitted by both publishers, and the Dent version effectively

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<sup>10</sup> We learn from a letter written by her to Macmillan that she did not approve of many of the alterations made by Guillemard, the editor: 10. (Kingsley, Letter to Macmillan, 1986 *cit.* Blunt p.63): ‘I would rather take a 200 ton vessel up a creek than write any book that incorporates Guillemard’s corrections, which make the thing read easier and more patronising and presuming – “appalling” for simply awful – “dwelling” for house – “terminals” for ends – “informed us that” for he said and so on.’

leaves the book without any kind of ending, giving it a markedly 'surprised' and incomplete air.

### **Analysis**

I will now proceed to look at samples of the text which I consider representative of the different narrative levels listed above. I will treat these levels as different personae or masks that the author has put on for the occasion, and to emphasise this aspect, I will label them as follows:

*Level 1: Diarist*

*Level 2: Letter-Writer*

*Level 3: Story-Teller*

*Level 4: General Lecturer*

*Level 5: Specialist.*

In each case, I will attempt to examine to what extent the expected style (given above) is respected or subverted, particularly with regards to issues of gender and racial identity.

### **Voice 1) *The Diarist***

As might be expected from a well-corsetted Victorian, the naked voice of the Diarist, especially the 'on-the-spot' diary jottings, is perhaps the least frequent of all the voices in the *Travels* in quantitative terms. Despite this, I am going to give considerable attention to this voice, given that it is the most intimate of all the voices in the text and, we assume, closest to the author's raw experience.

There are one or two places in the book where an unexpected shift from the narrative past tense into the present would seem to indicate the patching of two quite different discourses. Such an example occurs on page 153.

*'The off-shore breeze blows strong this morning and the tide is running out like a mill-race, so the Lafayette flies seaward gallantly. Libreville looks very bright and pleasing – with its red roofs and white walls amongst the surrounding wealth of dark green mango trees; but we soon leave it behind, passing along the front of the low, rolling hills, all densely clad with forests...'*

The use of the present tense here is clearly not for dramatic effect, coming as it does after the factual and informative tone of the previous paragraph. The deictic phrase 'this morning', combined with the use of the present continuous ('is running') clearly suggest that these sentences were written *in situ*, and that they represent Kingsley's visual and auditory impressions, as she sits in the boat sailing along.

*'The Lafayette flies along before a heavy sea, and from my position at the bottom of her I can see nothing but her big white mainsail and her mast with its shrouds and stays standing out clear, rocking to and fro, against the hard blue sky; and just the white crests of the waves as they go dancing by. I have nothing to hear save the pleasantest sounds in the world – the rustle of the sail and the swish of the waves as they play alongside the vessel. Now and then there is added to these the lazy, laughing talk of the black men; and now and then an extra lively wave throws its crest in among us.'* (p.154)

These sentences are the nearest one gets in the *Travels* to Mary Kingsley's pure unconstructed perceptions, and as such, they constitute interesting evidence of her unconscious worldview. In the first passage quoted above, the use of 'we' is salutary. It is an utterly unconscious grouping of herself with her crew in a personal pronoun that reveals an erosion of the 'them and us' mentality typical of the colonial era. For the moment, at least, Mary Kingsley is not aware of any barriers separating her from her crew; they are common humanity, sailing along through the natural world in a quasi-meditative state of oneness and tranquillity<sup>11</sup>.

This state of oneness and empathy is not sustained, however. In the final line of the second of the quoted passages, the word 'black' hits our modern sensibilities with a clout; it is clearly redundant, since there is no distinction to be made between them and any other men of any other colour. I would suggest that this is an occasion where Mary Kingsley allows the language to take over and form her personal perceptions (in the manner described by Said in the extract quoted in footnote 6). Indeed, it might be reasonable to assume that she would have written 'blackman' as a single word, as was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (reflecting the notion that a black man was not merely a 'man who was black', but some distinctly different entity that warranted a noun to itself), and that the separation into adjective and noun may be the work of a politically-correct modern editor.

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<sup>11</sup> It might be useful to compare this with a parallel passage from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, in which the black crew of the ship are described through the perceptions of the white narrator, Marlowe. Although *Heart of Darkness* presents itself as a work of fiction, it is not unreasonable to assume that Marlowe is expressing the 'typical' white colonialist viewpoint. 'It was unearthly, and the men were – No, they were no inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it – this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity – like yours – the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar.' (p.51).

Another interesting example of the Diarist voice is to be found on p.92 at the beginning of Chapter 5:

*'I own I did not much care for these Ajumbas on starting, but they are evidently going to be kind and pleasant companions. One of them is a gentlemanly-looking man, who wears a gray shirt; another looks like a genial Irishman who has accidentally got black, very black; he is distinguished by wearing a singlet; another is a thin, elderly man, notably silent; and the remaining one is a strapping, big fellow, as black as a wolf's mouth, of gigantic muscular development, and wearing quantities of fetish charms hung about him. The first two mentioned are Christians, the other two pagans, and I will refer to them by the characteristic points, for their honourable names are awfully alike when you do hear them, and, as is usual with Africans, rarely used in conversation.'*

The presence of the Diarist is signalled once again by the use of the 'going to' future in the first line, which has a deictic function, situating the moment of discourse in time. What is striking about this passage, and the paragraphs which follow, is that we almost lose sight of the fact that she is speaking about natives; indeed, by the time we get to the description of Gray Shirt's house on the next page, an unattentive reader may be under the impression that Gray Shirt is a white colonialist. This merging of identities is achieved by the emphasis upon characteristics that stress the individual humanity of the men; they are described as 'gentlemanly-looking', 'genial', 'thin', 'elderly' 'silent' etc, none of which are stereotypical adjectives for natives. The clothes are presented as distinguishing features, much as they might be if Europeans were being described; and, paradoxically, the two references to colour ('a genial Irishman who has accidentally got black, very black' an 'as black as a wolf's mouth') are presented as unique, distinguishing features on the level of the other adjectives, rather than as generalised markers of Otherness. This passage is a world away from the conventional attitude of the colonialist, who sees natives as an undistinguished mass of black otherness; these men are presented first and foremost as *people*, with a richly defined individuality that is respected, not caricatured as it would be by a racist.

### **Voice 2) *The Letter-Writer***

It has not been easy to distinguish the Diarist from the Letter-Writer, as the two styles share many characteristics (notably the effect of spontaneity generated by the use of the present tense and deictic features). In fact, the only clearly distinguishing feature is the

presence of a narratee that is clearly other than the author herself. I will tentatively suggest the following as an example:

*'We have an addition to our crew this morning – a man who wants to go and get work at John Holt's sub-factory away on the Rembwé. He has been waiting a long while at Arevooma, unable to get across, I am told, "because the road is now stopped between Ayzingo and the Rembwé by 'those fearful Fans'". "How are we going to get through that way?" says I, with natural feminine alarm. "We are not, sir," says Gray Shirt. This is what Lady MacDonald would term a chatty little incident...'* (p.95)

Lady Macdonald was a real person with whom Kingsley corresponded (Blunt, p.132), and her idiosyncratic way of speaking is referred to more than once in the *Travels* (cf. p25). It would be reasonable to assume, therefore, that this passage was originally penned as a letter to a mutual friend; for unless Lady MacDonald was a high-profile public figure, the reference would be ineffectual in any other kind of text. The presence of this narratee immediately throws the rest of the passage into perspective. Kingsley now has an audience, and consequently, she begins to act a role. The story becomes farcical. Her own utterance is presented within inverted commas, and the 'says I' (which is deliberately ungrammatical, echoing the voice of a music-hall comedienne) indicates that she has become a character in her own story. This low-life persona thus throws the lady's 'feminine alarm' into relief, creating an irony at the expense of English femininity which is further emphasised by epithet 'Sir' used by Gray Shirt. This irony is clearly highly subversive, especially in the context of the adventurousness of the voyage. She is presenting feminine frailty as a non-essential, socially-determined form of behaviour, something one 'puts on' in a given social situation, just as one puts on a particular kind of dress or discourse.

### **Voice 3) Story-Teller**

The voice that I label the 'Story-Teller' is that who offers light-hearted lectures in establishments such as the Cheltenham Ladies College<sup>12</sup>. Given that the narratee is a 'light' audience consisting of young ladies of the upper and middle classes, it is reasonable to assume that her purpose is essentially to entertain. Her style in these excerpts is coolly sensationalist; she consciously tries to thrill her audience, and we can almost feel her relishing the squeals and shrieks

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<sup>12</sup> This institute features frequently, as recipient of both oral lectures and written articles (Cf. Blunt 1994).

that would undoubtedly accompany many of her accounts. Shocking subjects are presented in a language that her audience will understand, and the effect is thus to highlight the difference. For example, the episode when she is staying in a Fan village and comes across a bag in her 'bedroom' emitting a strange smell:

*'I shook its contents out in my hat, for fear of losing anything of value. They were a human hand, three big toes, four eyes, two ears, and other portions of the human frame. The hand was fresh, the others only so so, and shrivelled.*

*Replacing them I tied the bag up, and hung it up again. I subsequently learnt that although the Fans will eat their fellow friendly tribesfolk, yet they like to keep a little something belonging to them as a memento. This touching trait in their character I learnt from Wiki; and, though it's to their credit, under the circumstances, still it's an unpleasant practice when they hang the remains in the bedroom you occupy, particularly if the bereavement in your host's family has been recent.'* (p.115)

This tale is recounted in such a matter-of-fact tone, so devoid of any kind of horror on the part of the narrator, that its shocking content is highlighted. It might have been stones or beads that she found in the bag for all the emotional response that it provoked in her. This blasé persona is clearly adopted in the face of a particular kind of narratee; it is the cool stance of the 'woman-of-the-world', deliberately contrasting herself with the impressionable schoolgirls she is addressing.

She achieves this effect by a very deft and subtle use of language. In places, her prose echoes the language of society ladies, as in the affected delicacy about unpleasant smells and death, and the 'concern' for the sensibility of others ('this touching trait', and 'if the bereavement in your host's family has been recent'). The effect of this is to throw the two situations into relief, thus satirising English ladies' attitudes, making them look foolish and superficial.

She frequently shows a clear awareness of the individual's capacity to assume roles to suit different situations, and this in itself undermines essentialist notions about identity (and provides a commentary upon her own narrative posturings). On page 146, we are introduced to the flamboyant character of Obanjo:

*'At this point in the affair there entered a highly dramatic figure. He came on to the scene suddenly and with much uproar, in a way that would have made his fortune in a transpontine drama. He dashed up on to the verandah, smote the frail form of Mr Glass between the shoulders, and flung his own massive one into a chair. His name was Obanjo, but he liked it pronounced Captain Johnson, and his profession was a bush and river trader on his own account. Every movement of the man was theatrical, and he used*

*to look covertly at you every now and then to see if he had produced his impression, which was evidently intended to be that of a reckless, rollicking skipper.’ (p.146)*

Kingsley clearly likes and identifies with Obanjo, no doubt seeing in him a role-player like herself:

*‘The eye were the eyes of Obanjo, the rest of the face the property of Captain Johnson.’ (p.147)*

However, before long, Obanjo is overshadowed by an even more theatrical character:

*‘While engaged in shouting “Encore” to the third round, I received a considerable shock by hearing a well-modulated evidently educated voice saying in most perfect English:*

*“Most diverting spectacle, madam, is it not?”*

*Now you do not expect to hear things called “diverting spectacles” on the Rembwé; so I turned round and saw standing on the bank against which our canoe was moored, what appeared to me to be an English gentleman who had from some misfortune gone black all over and lost his trousers and been compelled to replace them with a highly ornamental table-cloth.’ (p149)*

The ‘you’ in the fourth line of this quotation clearly implies a complicity between the narrator and narratee, who are associated in English surprise at this encounter, a complicity that is reaffirmed at the end of the episode with the use of the word ‘home’:

*‘Obanjo evidently thought him too much of a lavender-kid-glove gentleman to deal with bush trade, and held it was the usual way; a man got spoilt by going to Europe. I quite agree with him on general lines, but Prince Makaga had a fine polish on him without the obvious conceit usually found in men who have been home.’(p150)*

‘Home’, like any other relational word, alters its referent according to the point of view adopted: ‘home’ to the author refers to a very different geographical location to ‘home’ from the point of view of Prince Makaga, which is different again to that of Obanjo, and it is salient that here, the narrator is not identifying with either of the Africans but with her narratee. This distances her from her subject, who becomes a character on a stage watched by narrator and narratee alike.

Even more interesting is the way that the narrator, during this episode, also becomes a character in her own narrative. The narrator thus has a double role; without relinquishing the blasé persona of the storyteller/explorer addressing her English narratee, she also takes

upon herself the manners and voice of the narratee to Prince Makaga's narrator:

*'Taking a large and powerful cigar from his lips with one hand, he raised his head gracefully with the other and said:  
 "Pray excuse me, madam."  
 I said, "Oh, please go on smoking."  
 "May I?" he said, offering me a cigar-case.  
 "Oh, no thank you," I replied.  
 "Many ladies do now," he said, and asked me whether I "preferred Liverpool, London, or Paris."  
 I said, "Paris; but there were nice things in both the other cities."  
 "Indeed that is so," he said; "they have got many very decent works of art in the St George's Hall."  
 I agreed, but said I thought the National Gallery preferable because there you got such fine representative series of works of early Italian schools. I felt I had got to rise to this man whoever he was, somehow, and having regained my nerve, I was coming up hand over hand to the level of his culture when Obanjo and the crew arrived, carrying goats.'* (p.150)

This dual effect is achieved largely through the manipulation of direct and indirect speech. Whilst the former technique gives the impression of a tableau in which actors are uttering pre-rehearsed exchanges for the benefit of an audience, the second creates a distance and locates the main locus of interchange in the interaction between the Story-Teller narrator and the audience she is addressing. The transition between the two modes is effected neatly in the line, 'I said, "Paris, but there were nice things in both the other cities"' where the not-entirely-grammatical use of indirect verb forms (past tense) in direct speech allows her to slide back neatly into her other role in the line beginning 'I agreed'.

This ability of Mary Kingsley to speak in many voices is revealed to its full effect on page 47 when she describes one of her first encounters with the Fans:

*'I had not gone far on my quest before I saw another village, and having had enough village work for one day, I made my way quietly up into the forest on the steep hillside overhanging the said village. There was no sort of path up there, and going through a clump of shenja, I slipped, slid, and finally fell plump through the roof of an unprotected hut.  
 What the unfortunate inhabitants were doing, I don't know, but I am pretty sure they were not expecting me to drop in, and a scene of great confusion occurred. My knowledge of Fan dialect then consisted of Kor-kor, so I said that in as fascinating a tone as I could, and explained the rest with three pocket handkerchiefs, a head of tobacco, and a knife which*

*providentially I had stowed in what my nautical friends would call my afterhod – my pockets’. (p.47)*

This short passage is exemplary in that it reveals four different ‘languages’. The initial lines of the quotation are once again echoing the discourse of the polite young lady audience whom Kingsley the Story-Teller seems to be addressing; she presents herself as a little weary after a spate of exertion, (just as a well-brought-up young lady might be expected to feel after a stroll through the grounds of a stately home) and was about to discreetly retire when the unfortunate incident occurs. The use of ‘drop in’ creates the irony. This phrasal verb is of course a stock element in the vocabulary of polite society, with an affected spontaneity that contrasts markedly with the decidedly unspontaneous nature of most social encounters (“Oh, *do* drop in next time you’re in town!”). In this episode, of course, the original spontaneity is recaptured, as is the verb’s primary meaning, for Mary Kingsley did literally drop into the hut. The scene of confusion that we witness may be taken to be parallel to a scene of confusion that would necessarily occur were a guest in England to have taken an invitation at face value and paid an impromptu visit. Once again, this highlights both the similarity and the differences between the two scenes, and the effect is to subversively undermine the seriousness of the English rituals.

Thereafter, our narrator/character attempts to communicate with her ‘hosts’ in their own language (the use of ‘then’ implies that she did subsequently learn to speak their language with much more proficiency), and what she cannot transmit, she makes up with in the language of trade. There is also a reference to a fourth ‘language’ – the dialect of the sailors. This ability of Mary Kingsley to affect different tongues is possibly her most interesting and subversive trait, and contrasts markedly with the stance affected by most English colonialists, who impose their language and customs upon those of their subjects without the slightest sensitivity<sup>13</sup>. She reveals that she genuinely listens to those about her and attempts to enter their world and communicate with them on their own terms. It is a skill that she applies to all the people she encounters on her voyage and equally to all the narratees she addresses in her book. This, to my mind, is how we

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<sup>13</sup> The common view is summed up neatly by Eça de Queiroz in ‘The English in Egypt’: ‘The Englishman falls on the ideas and customs of other nations like a lump of granite in the water: and there he stays, a weighty encumbrance, with his Bible, his sports and his prejudices, his etiquette and selfishness - completely unaccommodating to those among whom he lives.’

should approach the sections that I am going to examine next, namely those in which she adopts the role of the Lecturer and the Scientist.

#### **Voice 4) *The Lecturer***

The voice that I will examine next is much more serious and dignified than the others we have looked at so far, and, as such, incorporates many elements of sage discourse<sup>14</sup>. The chapter I consider to be particularly indicative of this voice is the one entitled 'Pastimes and Pursuits of my friends the Fans', which is clearly addressed to an intelligent and informed yet non-specialist narratee such as those that she might have been expected to encounter at the Manchester Chamber of Commerce or the Highgate Literary and Scientific Institute. The title of the section would seem to be addressed to an ethnologist, but for the interpolation of the phrase 'my friends', which introduces an empathetic element to what might otherwise have been an objective scientific study. The result is an interesting hybrid style that has much in common with the voice of the 'Scientist' (that I will look at next) and that of the 'Story-Teller'.

In common with the 'Scientist', the predominant tone of this section is didactic. Observations about the lifestyle of the Fans are presented as objective 'facts':

*'We will now enter into the reason that induces the bush man to collect stuff to sell among the Fans, which is the expensiveness of the ladies in the tribe. A bush Fan is bound to marry into his tribe, because over a great part of the territory occupied by them there is no other tribe handy to marry into...'* (p138)

This factual tone is achieved by the use of the universalising present tense, unmodified by any modals or adverbials that might indicate the filter of a subjective consciousness. Consequently, the 'bush Fan' is reduced to a specimen, and there is little evidence of the empathy that Kingsley has shown elsewhere.

Although there is no doubt that Kingsley here reproduces to a large extent the dominant discourse of the time, I would argue that this is one more example of her deliberately speaking the language of her interlocutors. To be taken seriously in a predominantly male, intellectual environment, she would have been obliged (then, as now)

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<sup>14</sup> The discourse of the Victorian sage perhaps best embodies the patriarchal, imperialist perspectives of day. It is extensively described by John Holloway (1965).

to reduce her empathetic involvement to a minimum, at the risk of having her precious knowledge belittled as fabricated or trivial<sup>15</sup>.

Despite this, however, her more personal perceptions are unable to be constrained for long. Some lines down, in the same paragraph about the marriage customs of the Fans, she states:

*'A Benga lady would marry a M'pongwe, or a Benga, but not a Banak, or Bapoka; and so on with the others; but not one of them would marry a Fan. As for the men, well of course they would marry any lady of any tribe, if she had a pretty face, or a good trading connection, if they were allowed to: that's just man's way.'* (p138)

The use of the modal verb 'would' has already caused the mask of scientific impersonality to slip. Like all modals, this verb imparts a subjectivity to the description that belies the scientific stance (a more 'scientific' rendering would use the present simple tense and plural nouns in a simple generalisation; ie. 'Benga ladies marry M'pongwes or Bengas, but not Banaks or Bapokas...' etc). The function of this use of 'would' is that of Volition or Willingness<sup>16</sup>. Combined with the individualising effect of the singular noun, the result is a clear sense of the Benga lady as an individual with a mind of her own, ready to assert herself in order to further her own interests.

The comment about male behaviour at the end of the extract is double-edged. It has been criticised as an example of Kingsley's essentialist notions about gender, and indeed may reveal that she saw gender as a unifying trait, undermining the more 'artificial' construct of nation. Alternatively, it may be read ironically, as an almost flirtatious engagement with her gentleman narratee. She seems to be saying, 'Let's face it, you're all pragmatic fellows too! I understand you well'. Once again, we have Kingsley as the arch communicator, creating a complicity with her narratee whilst surreptitiously sliding in discomforting elements to upturn his neat worldview.

The same tension is maintained throughout this chapter. On page 143, she reproduces swathes of scientific prose on the subject of the

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<sup>15</sup> Mills (1991: Ch.4) exploring the reception of women's travel writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, claims that 'women, in conventional wisdom, are judged to be deceitful' (p.112). Knowledge of this would undoubtedly have affected Mary Kingsley's decision to adopt a 'masculine' style.

<sup>16</sup> See Quirk and Greenbaum (1973: Section 3.51) One of the primary functions of the modal 'will' ('would' in the Past) is to stress the insistence or self-assertion of the subject. This is clearest in sentences such as 'He *will* do it whatever you say' or 'He *will* smoke in the bedroom'.

Fans that has clearly been influence by the current fashion for taxonomy and for Darwinian theory:

*'..one continually sees magnificent specimens of human beings, both male and female. Their colour is light bronze, many of the men have beards, and albinos are rare among them. The average height in the mountain districts is five feet six to five feet eight, the difference in stature between men and women not being great.*

*Their countenances are very bright and expressive, and if once you have been among them, you can never mistake a Fan. But it is in their mental characteristics that their difference from the lethargic, dying-out coast tribes is most marked.'* (p143)

However, even here, the tone is offset by a rapid slide into subjectivity just a few lines on:

*'I never found him treacherous; but then I never trusted him ...'* (p.144),

after which she launches into a very personal reminiscence about the aphorisms of her friend and advisor, Captain Boler of Bonny. It is as if this narratorial voice is unable to keep up the pretence of scientific distance for long, such was her real involvement with the 'specimen' under scrutiny.

### **Voice 5) *The Scientist***

Chapters 9 to 11 are the parts of the book that best exemplify the voice which I have called the 'Scientist' and which have most laid Mary Kingsley open to charges of complicity with the established discourse. Indeed, there are strong grounds for this. Looking at Chapter 9, 'Stalking the Wild West African Idea', we can see that she has adopted a textual organisation that is still in use today for structuring of scientific papers. She begins by defining her terms ('Neither "fetish" nor "ju-ju" are native words...' etc); and proceeds to present her argument in a very logical fashion, referring to recognised authorities in the field (Frazer and Tyler, pp164-5), and producing a case-study (the sample of trade English on page 162) which she proceeds to analyse in depth. Her discourse is organised in an exemplary fashion using clear introductory topic sentences at the head of each paragraph, which are systematically elaborated upon in the subsequent sentences; and the tone is highly didactic, presenting herself as an authority in the field:

*'Now for the elementary student we will consider this letter'* (p163).

As is to be expected in a work of this type, the style is objective, rational and non-emotional, and empathy with the 'specimen' is reduced to a minimum. The few metaphors encountered are carefully chosen to reflect the interests and perspective of the narratee:

*'Stalking the wild West African idea is one of the most charming pursuits in the world. Quite apart from the intellectual, it has a high sporting interest, for its pursuit is as beset with difficulty and danger as grizzly bear hunting...'* (p160)

Nevertheless, having won over her narratee to her point of view, she very subtly manipulates the metaphor to make it a vehicle for a quite unconventional opinion:

*'The difficulty of the language is, however, far less than the whole set of difficulties with your own mind. Unless you can make it pliant enough to follow the African idea step by step, however, much care you may take, you will not bag your game...'* (p164)

She proceeds to recount an anecdote about a 'representative of her Majesty in Africa' who went out antelope shooting, but was constantly thwarted in his attempts by the presence of the consular flag that was being held aloft by servant coming behind:

*'Well, if you go hunting the African idea with the flag of your own religion or opinions floating ostentatiously over you, you will similarly get a very poor bag.'* (p164)

This, to my mind, is Mary Kingsley at her most subversive. With her scientific prose, and familiar-sounding metaphors, she has managed to infiltrate the minds of the complacent members of the scientific establishment, and then, with a deft parable, introduces a notion that is designed to overturn all their assumptions. If her aim was in fact to alter the mindset of the establishment, then she could not have chosen a better weapon than this familiar-sounding scientific prose.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating that *Travels in West Africa* is not just a repository of confused and contradictory attitudes towards gender and empire, but that it contains clearly thought-out strategies for bringing the world view of the Other home to a series of different narratees. Like a translator, she speaks many languages, using her extraordinary powers of empathy to first enter

into the world of the Other, and then recode her new perceptions in a way that will be accessible to a series of different audiences. She demonstrates an exceptional communicative competence and it is this that may in fact be her most subversive trait.

I feel that it is futile to attempt, as many critics have done, to work out from this melange of voices what Mary Kingsley the individual truly thought about any of these issues. With the exception of the tiny fragments of perception we can glean from the 'Diarist' voice, her own opinion remains hidden, just as the identity of an actor is hidden behind the roles he plays. Her letters support this view:

*'The best part of me is... doubt and self-distrust and melancholy, and heartache over other people. Why should I show it to people I don't care for and don't know? I put on armour and corruscating wit... when I go out to battle.'* (Letter to Dennis Kemp, undated. Cit. Blunt p134)

Consequently, all that we have of her is her voice. But it is a highly eloquent voice that refuses to be browbeaten into submission by the repository of prejudice and injustice that was the English language in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Her agile manipulation of language enabled her to make contact with a vast range of different audiences on their own terms, and she flattered and cajoled her readers enough to gain their attention and respect. But she was not content simply to reproduce established discourses. As we have seen, once the reader's confidence was won, she set about introducing glimpses of different perspectives into the conventional framework, perspectives that were as original and far-reaching as it is possible for a Victorian spinster to achieve within the constraints of the day.

The overall picture that emerges is of a consistently Other-centred approach to literary production. This manifests itself in the way the style is adapted to the expectations of different readers, and also in the way she subtly attempts to manipulate the readers' worldview in order to incorporate the perspective of some other Other. Essentially, she is a diplomat or a translator, mediating between worlds, and her own personal opinions have been effaced in her efforts to persuade her narratee and subject to 'get along'. Whether this is to be taken as a subversive or conservative activity is open to interpretation. Personally, I incline towards the former; for, unlike the radical postures of the New Woman or the revolutionary, who align themselves with non-Establishment positions and thus risk alienating the people whose opinions most need to be changed, the mediator

works from the inside, and ultimately succeeds in destroying the very infrastructures of the worldview that kept divisive opinions in place.

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