

Version 1.0 | Last updated 28 March 2019

Literature (Africa)

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Memoirs, songs, poems and fiction dealing with the great war in Africa began to appear as early as 1916 and tended to be either escapist adventure stories loosely based on actual events or chronicles of the very real privations endured on campaigns in a bid to prove that the war in Africa was every bit as horrible as the Western Front. With very few exceptions, their focus tends to be on the actions of Europeans with Africans and the local landscape relegated to the background, reduced to stereotypes or used as an example of something to be overcome.

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Introduction

The adage that Africa is the forgotten front in WWI holds true for its treatment in literature. While there are several dozen novels and a great many published songs, poems, and memoirs dealing with the

African campaigns, all except [C. S. Forester's \(1899-1966\) *African Queen*](#) and [William Boyd's \(1952- \) Booker Prize-nominated *An Ice Cream War*](#) are relatively obscure.^[1] Scholarly treatment of this literature is equally lacking and tends to focus primarily on works related to the [East Africa](#) campaign.^[2] Regardless of format, literary treatments of the war in Africa are heavily Eurocentric and tend to focus on hardships endured and the logistical difficulty of fighting in the tropics where combat was often overshadowed by long marches and periods of inactivity. When Africa and Africans enter into the picture it is often in the form of stereotypes about the supposedly savage landscape and simplistic nature and unquestioning loyalty of African subjects forced into service to fight the white man's war.

Memoirs

European Memoirs

Memoirs by civilians who spent the war in Africa are rare. The best known of these, Isak Dinesen's (aka Karen Blixen 1885-1962) *Out of Africa*, barely touches on the war and its effects on Kenya.^[3] Instead, she provides a series of vignettes depicting the perceived exoticism of Africa and how different its societies and peoples were from their European counterparts.^[4] Other British and German civilians produced war time memoirs detailing allegations of abuse and mistreatment at the hands of enemy forces as they were captured, interned and deported back to Europe.^[5] Their complaints include humiliation at being guarded by African soldiers, taunts, intimidation, looting, threats of violence, being forced to perform manual labor, and poor conditions in prison camps and aboard ships bound for Europe. These themes were given a new lease on life in the 1930s with the appearance of [Hans Grimm's \(1875-1959\) *Der Ölsucher von Duala*](#), a novel which the author claims was based on the diary of a German civilian who died in prison in Dahomey.^[6]

The bulk of memoirs by settlers who served in combat during the war were written by those who left Africa to fight in Europe.^[7] Of those who wrote about serving in the African [theater of war](#), senior officers tended to focus on quasi-official histories emphasizing tactics, strategy, command decisions and macro views of battles.^[8] Most of these works speak only in general terms of [casualties](#) and the privations endured by the men under their command. More detailed accounts by figures like [Heinrich Schnee \(1871-1949\)](#) and [Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck \(1870-1964\)](#) include discussions about the transition to guerilla war and the difficulties that entailed, such as the isolation of being cut off from mail and news, the chronic lack of supplies, and the development of bush industries to make cloth and tan hides for leather.^[9]

Memoirs by junior officers provide more detail and focus more on the daily reality of war, including boredom, long marches, dust, torn and rotting clothes, hunger, lack of water, and chronic illness.^[10] Some did so explicitly to challenge the notion that the African campaigns were a side show with better conditions than on the [Western Front](#). Occasionally authors expressed respect for the

enemy's military abilities, while others complained that the Germans fought dirty citing encounters with mines, booby traps and poisoned wells as evidence.^[11] Junior officers were more likely than their commanders to describe battles and casualties in their memoirs, but kept the focus on the actions of Europeans and their losses. Africans show up rarely, usually as passing references to porters or soldiers who remain nameless and faceless. Walter Downes and Angus Buchanan are rare exceptions. Both recognized the contributions of individual NCOs and scouts in their memoirs.^[12] But even they engage in **stereotypes**, describing *Askaris* as simple, brave, obedient and loyal soldiers who nevertheless remain uncivilized. Others, like **Max Yergan (1892-1975)**, openly worried about the wisdom of teaching Africans to kill and made a note of language problems which hampered communication between white officers and African rank and file soldiers drawn from across colonial Africa.^[13]

When it comes to the landscape and environment of the African fronts, European memoirs tend to describe it as an exotic, savage and inhospitable realm of swamp, desert and thorn filled scrub land. Heat, illness, and vast distances all exact a harsh toll on humans and draft animals. While most memoirs make a point of complaining about the ubiquitous mosquitos, jiggers, and scorpions, others delighted in describing the movements of wild animals found in the bush. Predictably, much of this appears in the form of extensive passages devoted to shooting game animals for sport and to supplement rations.^[14] In addition to hunting, European memoirs often note the prevalence of other entertainment to alleviate boredom and render the environment less alien.^[15] South African forces in **Egypt** engaged in soccer and rugby matches while those in Southwest Africa went swimming on the beach at Swakopmund. After taking Dar-es-Salam, British troops had a sports day with tug-of-war contests, foot races, and a race to collect and cut coconuts. On the more intellectual side, European forces also had access to concerts, lectures, and shows.

African Memoirs

There are very few war memoirs written by Africans. Of those that do exist, nearly all focus on service on the Western Front with only small portions discussing their recruitment and early training in Africa.^[16] The best known of these is **Bakary Diallo's (1892-1978)** autobiographical novel *Force Bonté* which chronicles the experiences of a young African soldier from enlistment through his war-time service in **France**.^[17] Central themes of Diallo's book include acceptance of the stereotypical notion that Africans were childlike, gratitude to France for its civilizing mission, loyalty, and the fundamental equality of wartime experiences on the front. Other Africans who served on the Western Front noted that they enlisted for material benefits rather than loyalty to their colonial masters and spoke about conditions on the battlefield, the horror of seeing friends wounded or killed, their unease about killing white men, and their desire to go home.^[18]

Of the handful of memoirs by Africans who saw service in the Cameroon and East African campaigns, one of the most extensive is that of John G. Mullen, a clerk from the Gold Coast who

was working at a British trading station in eastern Cameroon when the war broke out.^[19] Mullen fled home on foot, passing through prison camps at Ajoshohe and Yaoundé. Soon thereafter he published a serialized memoir in the *Gold Coast Leader* which only rarely touches on the progress or politics of the war. Instead, it reads as an “adventure-story filled with [cliffhangers,] vivid dialog and suspense” as Mullen recounts his journey and efforts to escape cannibals and German forces alike.^[20] Throughout it all, Mullen repeatedly self identifies as an educated British subject and makes use of colonial stereotypes when describing the ferocity and “savage” nature of Cameroonians. Germans who appear in Mullen’s account also fall into familiar tropes as large, masculine and violent men prone to seizing property, burning villages, meting out corporal punishment, and the use of military parades to generate fear and awe.^[21]

Memoirs by Africans who saw front line service in Africa also describe their enlistment and battles, but focus primarily on the privation and hardships endured by carriers and troops.^[22] While Mzee Ali, already a longtime member of the German *Schutztruppe*, claims to have been better informed about the nature and intensity of the war than newer recruits, the experience of most African veterans echoed that of Nwose, a Nigerian serving with the Carrier Corps during the Cameroon campaign, who reveals that he had no idea what to expect and was amazed and frightened by western technology.^[23] Like other African veterans, Nwose, Ali and Jakob Dosoo Amenyah describe the violence of the war, the sounds and smells of battle, casualties in the ranks, illness, the porters’ back breaking work carrying supplies, shortages of medicine, and chronic lack of food.^[24] Mirroring his European counterparts, Ali also complains about insects and wild animals while noting that as the war dragged on German forces routinely plundered villages and conscripted all men over the age of 16.^[25] Amenyah’s account repeats allegations of German atrocities ranging from the use of Dum Dum bullets to executing prisoners. Furthermore, it frequently references instances of racism that *Askaris* encountered at the hands of European soldiers.^[26] At the war’s end, Nwose and an *Askari* named Aibu Chikwenga were among the lucky veterans of the African campaigns in that they survived long enough to be demobilized, were paid off, allowed to retain their blankets, and in Nwose’s case, given guides to take them home.^[27] Many of their peers, including Mzee Ali, received no such assistance. Instead, they struggled to get promised wages and bonuses, and were essentially left to find their own way home.^[28]

Fiction

Other than Hans Grimm’s *Der Ölsucher*, there are no fictionalized accounts of the war in West Africa.^[29] Similarly, the only novel set in Southwest Africa is Siegfried Stander’s *The Fortress*, which focuses primarily on the tensions between military and civil authorities at a frontier post over petty jealousies, how to maintain order, and the treatment of local Africans.^[30] The onset of the war, the Boer rebellion, and the impending invasion by forces near South Africa serve as the backdrop to the second half of the book in which German forces pursue a “Hottentot” who made off with cattle that

had been requisitioned to feed the garrison.

The bulk of war fiction set in Africa concentrates on the East Africa campaign with a large proportion of novels based on the Naval Africa Expedition which sent motorboats from [England](#) via Capetown to Lake Tanganyika to take on and sink the German steamers *Hedwig von Wissman* and *Graf von Goetzen*. The earliest and best known fictional account of this expedition is C. S. Forester's *African Queen* which is essentially an adventure story set in the mythical colony of German Central Africa where British civilians - a female missionary and a steam launch captain - attempt to sink the cruiser *Königen Luise* using a small boat and homemade torpedoes.^[31] While the novel is filled with references to real events in East Africa and has a German character clearly modeled on Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, other elements in the novel such as the use of homemade torpedoes and missionary involvement may have been inspired by events in Cameroon where a German missionary attempted to sink HMS *Dwarf* using tactics eerily similar to those described by Forester.^[32] The Naval Africa Expedition went on to inspire four more novels with varying degrees of historical accuracy and artistic license such as invented dialogue, name changes, and composite characters.^[33]

Other naval elements of the war in East Africa appear in [Percy Westerman's \(1876-1959\) *Rounding up the Raider*](#) and Wilbur Smith's *Shout at the Devil* which both offer fictionalized accounts of efforts to sink the German cruiser *Königsberg* after it became trapped in the Rufiji delta.^[34] In Westerman's retelling, a trio of British officers are taken prisoner by the German raider *Pelikan* which then takes refuge in the fictional Mahoro river where it becomes trapped by blockading British ships. Smith's novel offers a different spin, centering on the feud between ivory poachers and the increasingly violent German campaign to stop them. As the war breaks out, the poachers begin spying on and raiding German forces while hatching a plan to sink the fictional German cruiser *Blücher* - a stand in for the real *Königsberg* - using explosives.

The land campaign in East Africa has received an even greater amount of literary attention. Several early novels like [Gertrude Page's \(1872-1922\) *Follow After*](#) and *Far from the Limelight*, [Owen Letcher's \(1884-1943\) *Cohort of the Tropics*](#), and [Balder Olden's \(1882-1949\) *On Virgin Soil*](#) examine the war's impact on settler societies, their anxiety about being sucked into the war, labor shortages caused by conscription, colonial rivalries between South Africans and Rhodesians, and tensions among and between different echelons of colonial society.^[35] These early novels rarely take the conflict in East Africa seriously and tend instead to be adventure stories in which the local landscape and people serve as little more than window dressing.^[36] Worse, there are scant references to the very real suffering caused by the war to civilians and combatants alike due to shortages and labor requisitions. Instead, these novels highlight the long periods of waiting endured by troops in Africa, their boredom, marches through the bush, and problems with insects and vegetation. When combat does come up, even in works by veterans like [P. C. Wren \(1875-1941\)](#), [Francis Brett Young \(1884-1954\)](#), Balder Olden or [Josef Viera \(1890-1970\)](#), the events described are usually invented minor

skirmishes with little impact on the overall war effort.^[37] While death and injuries occur, the violence described is muted and relatively bloodless. Other novels in this vein, including Westermann's *Wilhelmshurst of the Frontier Force* and Herbert Strang's *Tom Willoughby's Scouts*, take the form of young adult adventure stories which quickly descend into caricature.^[38] Strang and Westerman depict the Germans as overly militaristic, cunning and cruel, thinking nothing of mass reprisals against Africans for minor mistakes, while the derring-do of British characters personifies their heroism, fair play and resilience.

Modern novels like David Bee's *Our Fatal Shadow*, [William Stevenson's \(1924-2013\) *Ghosts of Africa*](#), William Boyd's *An Ice Cream War* and Hamilton Wende's *The King's Shilling* tend to weave their plot lines around historical events and include some actual historical figures as characters.^[39] They also include more accurate depictions of real battles and the violence of war in east Africa. While Stevenson makes use of artistic license by adding American characters and altering parts of the historical record, such as marrying off Von Lettow-Vorbeck in the midst of his guerilla campaign against the British, he correctly depicts the conscription of German civilians, tensions between military and civilian authorities, German dreams of *Mittel Afrika*, the failed British invasion at Tanga, the entrapment of the *Konigsberg* in the Rufiji delta, the rapacious demand of colonial armies for porters, and the *LZ-59 zeppelin* mission to resupply German forces in the field.^[40] Wende's novel touches on these same events with the same degree of accuracy and uses them as background for the central storyline of his novel which concerns failed efforts by British, African and Indian troops to hunt down a group of deserters who fled into the bush. Similarly, Boyd places his characters in the midst of these same events as he explores their various motives for taking part in the East African campaign.

As with memoirs, most fictional accounts of the Great War set in Africa tend to relegate Africa and Africans to the background. In tales like Forester's *African Queen*, Christopher Dow's *Lord of the Loincloth*, and Strang's *Tom Willoughby's Scouts*, the countryside, climate and animal life are brought up only to showcase their untamed and unforgiving nature, hardships endured, and give the white characters something to overcome. Depictions of Africans are similarly dismissive. While some early novels like Young's *Jim Redlake*, Wren's *Cupid in Africa*, Olden's *On Virgin Soil*, and Westermann's *Wilhelmshorst of the West Frontier Force* contain passages exploring relations between European, Africans and Indian soldiers - relations which the authors experienced first-hand during their own wartime service in Africa - later fictional accounts of the war in Africa like the *Alpha Raid* or *An Ice Cream War* either barely mention Africans or indulge in racist stereotypes depicting them as childlike innocents, fawning servants, or brutal savages.^[41] Smith's *Shout at the Devil* even goes so far as to describe an African servant as having a monkey face.^[42] Works by Stevenson, Wende, M. G. Vasani, and Fred Khumalo are exceptions in that they feature non-European characters. In *Ghosts of Africa*, a Zanzibari princess named Lanni acts as a spy while the [US](#) educated Masaai named Cornelius Oakes who leads a rebellion against British rule is clearly based on the historical figure of [John Chilembwe \(1871-1915\)](#). Wende, on the other hand, not only makes

frequent mention of African porters and non-commissioned officers, but turns Jemadar Kahn and corporals Juma and Akul of the KAR into central characters who are far better and braver soldiers than the Europeans commanding them. Vasanji's *The Book of Secrets* and *The Gunny Sack* are multi-generational stories about the Asian community in east Africa, portions of which describe the war's effects on the civilian population, including shortages, displacement, pressure from colonial officials to pass on messages, and violence at the hands of soldiers.^[43] The protagonist of Khumalo's novel *Dancing the Death Drill* is a mixed race South African named Pitso Motaung who enlists in the South African Native Labour Corps (SANLC) and is one of the few survivors when their transport ship, the SS *Mendi*, is sunk in the English Channel after colliding with another vessel.^[44] In Khumalo's account, SANLC recruits did not understand the nature or origins of the war, enlisting only for material rewards and to demonstrate their manhood. From the start of their enlistment through to their eventual service in France they were also, with few exceptions, subject to varying degrees of racism, ranging from harsh discipline, spoiled food, Britain's refusal to arm them, and the requirement that they always be accompanied by a white officer.

Poetry

The topic of African poetry from the Great War is largely unexplored and generally dismissed by scholars who relegate it to footnotes or appendices as examples of patriotic drivel driven by [propaganda](#).^[45] Most colonial soldiers who wrote poetry served in Europe and consequently wrote about the Western Front and its futility. The bulk of poets who remained in African colonies during the war were amateurs who joined better known authors such as [Francis Carey Slater \(1876-1958\)](#) and [Arthur Shearly Cripps \(1869-1952\)](#) in focusing on comic verse or themes wholly unrelated to the war. Nevertheless, while it is true that the African theaters "produced no great poetic giants like Wilfrid Owen [1893-1918]...", African poetry of the Great War was informed by local and international issues, routinely demonstrating fears from the home front, settler anxieties, and concerns about the future of [empire](#).^[46]

Whereas British wartime poetry routinely vilified Germans as the other, in South African verse from the home front white authors tended to indulge in a Romantic focus on the local countryside and its geographic features, often depicting it as an unspoiled Eden.^[47] South African poets frequently invoked the bush and animals to make readers think of home, loved ones, and comfort. Meanwhile, female poets like [Daphne de Waal \(1896-1971\)](#) wrote patriotic verse emphasizing heroism, sacrifice, manhood, and invoking the Victorian cult of motherhood by depicting Springboks defending the mother country and longing to see their own mothers before death.

The imagery used in verse was much darker among those who served on the front lines in Southwest Africa or German East Africa. Here, the terrain was described as an inhospitable alien world which preyed on soldiers and shattered romantic illusions of war service as some kind of great adventure by inflicting severe hardships in the form of food shortages, difficult travel, illness and

death.^[48] While serving in East Africa, the physician and novelist Francis Brett Young wrote poems which lamented the cold nights, thirst, death, and suffering of the march on Tanga.^[49] For many front-line poets, the only escape from the privations they endured was satire, a trend which reflected the white community's preference for comic verse.^[50] Anonymous examples appeared on the pages of *Karonga Kronical*, a periodical published from 1915-1926 for British troops serving in East Africa. Typical pieces in the *Kronical* and similar venues mock efforts by officers to teach newly arrived British soldiers parts of the local language and use parody to vent their general discontent with the prevalence of bad food, diseases, insects and harsh terrain.^[51]

As with memoirs and fiction, poetry written by Europeans rarely mentions Africans. Even [Robert Hellier Napier \(1884-1918\)](#), an officer who oversaw African porters in the Transport Corps in East Africa, tended to focus on patriotic, nostalgic and fundamentally Eurocentric themes in his verse.^[52] On those occasions when he does mention Africans it is primarily to speak of their loyalty. Two other Nyasaland poets known only as T. A. J. and E. H. depicted carriers in similar fashion whilst simultaneously acknowledging their suffering, describing them as noisy, ragged, dirty, poorly fed, with blistered feet, but ready to die for British glory. Arthur Shearly Cripps provides a rare and more accurate view of African participation in the war. While he frequently invoked the familiar image of soldiers as suffering Christ figures, he did so by referencing the sacrifice of porters and criticizing the destructive effect of the war and its impact on Africans.^[53]

If African-inspired poetry from the Great War is rare, works by Africans like the Xhosa poet, journalist and novelist [Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi \(1875-1945\)](#) are rarer still.^[54] His piece *The Black Army* sarcastically expresses gratitude that African men were in a position to help the British monarchy in its hour of need by loading supplies on ships bound for Europe, as well as serving in the South African Native Labour Corps in France. As such, he exhorts men to work fast and hard, be brave, do their duty, follow rules, and enhance African prestige. His poem "The Sinking of the Mendi" references the loss of SANLC members after their transport ship sunk following a collision at sea. Mqhayi emphatically states that those aboard did not die for the King, Britain or material gain. Instead, they were a sacrifice to the future on par with Abel and Jesus whose martyrdom lets the world live on.

Songs, Theater and Music Hall

White civilians in Africa generally preferred plays and musical performances intended primarily to provide light hearted relief in the form of farce and musicals, but were also exposed to a steady diet of more overtly patriotic songs and plays performed at concerts, music halls and revues.^[55] These included songs like "Laddie in Khaki" and a reworked version of "Who killed Cock Robin" that was turned into "Who killed Kaiser Bill?" In July 1916, the Palace Theater in Bulawayo put on a play called "The Man who stayed Home" which dealt with spies and cowardice. Other similar theater performances demonized slackers who failed to "do their bit" for the war effort. These displays of

patriotism were not confined to English speaking settlers. When French citizens in southern Africa were mobilized and dispatched to South Africa they spent their time en route drinking and patriotic singing of the *Marseillaise*.^[56]

Once in uniform, white soldiers from Africa - whether they served at home or on the Western Front - were far less patriotic in their choice of music. They generally preferred popular music hall tunes like "Keep the Home Fires Burning" and "Pack up your troubles in your old Kit bag" that expressed familiar visions of home such as girlfriends, pubs, family, and friends.^[57] Their favorite songs also indulged in the usual soldier gripes about poor food, army life, long periods of waiting, officers who had not seen combat, the strength and sprit of South African forces, and the longing to go home. Songs that focused on events in Africa were often rewritten versions of popular tunes like "It's a long way to Tipperary" with lyrics modified to fit the local situation in Africa.^[58] For example, the tune for "The Boys in Palestine" was taken from a missionary hymn called "Greenland's Icy Mountains" and had lyrics which complained about heat, sand, flies, and barren terrain.^[59] Similarly, the ditty "Here's to the K.A.R.," which celebrated the virtues and prowess of African troops, was set to the tune "Follow the Man from Cook's."^[60] Songs like "The Long, Long Trail," or "Sairie Marais" expressed the longing for home and extolled the virtues of South African women while referencing local icons like thorn trees and mealies (a kind of Indian corn).^[61] In songs like "A Recitation: German East" front line soldiers in Africa also added themes like boredom during long periods of waiting, chasing after Germans, terrible weather and sickness in the form of toenail fungus, jiggers, mosquitoes, and malaria.^[62]

Similar themes are explored in the "Chant of the Egyptian Labour Corps" and *Askari* marching songs, all of whose known examples come from the East African campaign.^[63] While white officers created patriotic marching songs for their African troops by setting Swahili lyrics to well-known British or American hymns like "Men of Harlech," "John Brown's Body," or "What a friend we have in Jesus," *Askaris* developed their own songs, often on the march, which drew on their own musical heritage and experiences during the war.^[64] Rather than the calls for loyalty, service and patriotism contained in songs crafted by their officers, the lyrics to *Askari* tunes reveal that they were often demoralized and depressed by the harsh realities of service including distance from home, concerns about family and crops left behind, uncertainty over when they would be paid, chronic hunger from short rations, and anger at white officers who huddled in safety at base camps while *Askaris* fought on the front lines.^[65] Not all *Askari* songs were sad. While waiting for battle they often relieved tension by singing songs which insulted the enemy as loudly as possible and recalled their own bravery and past victories.^[66] Similar themes infused the music and competitive dance competitions known as Beni both during and immediately after the war.^[67] Much more recently, William Kentridge's play *The Head and the Load* and John Akomfrah's film *Mimesis. African Soldier*, both of which were created to help commemorate the centenary of the war, revisit the suffering and valor of African soldiers, porters and laborers in powerful and all-too-rare visual formats.^[68]

Conclusion

While the literature of the Great War in Africa is neither well known nor frequently studied, the memoirs, fiction, poetry and songs linked to the African theaters serve as a potent reminder of the war's global reach and that fighting in the tropics created its own horrors on a par with those of the Western Front. Aside from the perennial complaints about conditions whilst on campaign, literature penned by Europeans demonstrates the patriotism of settler communities even as some questioned the role of Empire. More importantly, despite their Eurocentrism and tendency to descend into adventure stories, these literary accounts add to the handful of works by African authors which provide occasional and all-too-rare insights into the experiences and participation of non-white populations in the war.

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Notes

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4. † For an analysis of Dinesen's text see, Page, Melvin E: *The Myth of the Brass Serpent. Europeans and the Protection of African Civilians During the East Africa Campaign*, in: Ruano, E. Benito and Burgos, M. Espadas (eds.), *17th International Congress of Historical Sciences Proceedings*, vol. II. Madrid 1991, pp. 1044-1051; and Lewis, Simon: *Culture, Cultivation and Colonialism. Out of Africa and Beyond*, in: *Research in African Literatures*, 31/1 (Spring 2000), pp. 63-79.
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Citation

Orosz, Kenneth J.: *Literature (Africa)*, in: 1914-1918-online. *International Encyclopedia of the First World War*, ed. by Ute Daniel, Peter Gatrell, Oliver Janz, Heather Jones, Jennifer Keene, Alan Kramer, and Bill Nasson, issued by Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin 2019-03-28. DOI: 10.15463/ie1418.11356.

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