German South West Africa — A focus of research in cultural studies during the Wilhelmine Era?
Research note
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Abstract
The Protectorate German South West Africa was the only German colony which attracted a noteworthy number of German settlers and hence had a special relationship to the German Reich. This research note asks whether or to what extent German South West Africa became a subject of research, a challenge for the humanists and cultural scientists between 1884 and 1915. How, if at all, did the humanities and cultural studies concerned with historical developments approach this new component of the German Reich? Was there an academic appropriation of the Protectorate by historians, ethnologists and linguists as was implied occasionally in contemporary writings?

Introduction
Following the swift fall of German South West Africa in the very early stages of World War I and the subsequent transfer of the territory under South African administration, many of the former officials in the German colonial service considered the loss of this ‘protectorate’ of particular concern: German South West Africa had not only been the only German colony extensively settled by German farmers, but there also existed a strong emotional link between the motherland and its ‘offspring’. In the 1920s, when quite a few still harboured (illusionary) hope that the German colonial empire could still be resurrected, various voices repeatedly called for the case of former German South West Africa especially to be reassessed.

A recently published study on which this research note is based pursues the question whether the emotional bond the German public showed towards German South West Africa — disregarding all problems on the ground, including the Herero War— already existed before the outbreak of World War I and whether this corresponded with and correlated to the interests of German research and scholarship.1 In this context it was

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1 Heinz Duchhardt, Herausforderung Südwest? Die deutschen Kulturwissenschaften und das „Schutzgebiet“ Deutsch-Südwestafrika, Mainz, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Stuttgart, Steiner, 2013. The
not so much the applied sciences, such as tropical medicine, hydrology, geology and mining that were focussed on, but the humanities and cultural studies in a more narrow sense. In other words, did scholars working in history, ethnology and linguistics identify ‘challenges’ in the vast colonial territory of German South West Africa that motivated them and, simultaneously, opened up new areas of research?

Historiography

If one considers German historical scholarship, there is little to report. This finding does not come much as a surprise, though, as historical research in the Wilhelmine era still had an extremely national, if not to say nationalist outlook. Indeed, in an environment where there was no willingness to open up to questions on Europe as yet, there certainly was no willingness to do so with regard to the colonial world. Chairs in non-European history were still beyond the imagination of the cultural bureaucracy and research management of the time, meaning that there existed neither the structural prerequisites nor the fundamental knowledge that could have facilitated a scientific engagement with Germany’s ‘protectorates’. Interestingly, sub-Saharan Africa was only a topic of interest once at the Convention of German Historians in the two decades in question when a prominent participant delivered a paper on the Boer War; this again focussed on ‘Europe in Africa’, however, rather than the history of a certain region or ethnic group. The reasons are obvious: Until well into the 1930s many European historians were of the opinion that sub-Saharan Africa had no history and that there was no need for research as the local cultures lacked written sources and thus (!) had not contributed to ‘world culture’. As a continent short of a written heritage Africa was seen to have no history; all that was deemed to have any importance was said to have been imported and implemented by Europeans.

‘Europe in Africa’ was consequently the only strategy with which publishers could generate at least some interest for their books on Africa on the German book market. Among the handful of German experts writing on Africa under this banner two should be named: Dietrich Schäfer (1845–1929) and Paul Darmstaedter (1873–1934). Schäfer, who incidentally also gave the aforementioned paper on the Boer War at the Convention of German Historians in Halle in 1900, reached a broader audience in 1903, when he published, based on a series of university lectures, his *Kolonialgeschichte*

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1 The first Deutscher Historikertag (Convention of German Historians) took place in Munich in 1893; it has been organised, usually every other year, by the Verband der Historiker und Historikerinnen Deutschlands (German Association of Historians) in collaboration with a university since 1895. Cf. Peter Schumann, *Die deutschen Historikertage von 1893 bis 1937: die Geschichte einer fachhistorischen Institution im Spiegel der Presse*, Diss., Marburg, Universität, Fachbereich Geschichtswissenschaft, 1974.
(Colonial History) in the affordable Sammlung Göschens, reprinted in several editions, it soon also caught the attention of readers outside the academic circle. What should be stressed, though, is how very peripheral Africa remained in this publication; allocated just a few pages, the continent was reduced to no more than a mere shadow of the Americas, the Caribbean and India. Still, in the section covering the nineteenth century, South West Africa was given some prominence, albeit with the undertone that only colonial consolidation of this territory could be the way forward.

Darmstaedter, who unlike Schäfer was denied a career at Germany’s most prominent universities and subsequently taught at Göttingen University until removed by the National Socialists in 1933, belonged to a different generation and was the only German historian who published monographs exclusively on the ‘black continent’ in the period in question. The first volume of his Geschichte der Aufteilung und Kolonisation Afrikas seit dem Zeitalter der Entdeckungen (History of the Division and Colonisation of Africa since the Age of Discovery) was published on the eve of World War I in 1913. The second volume, covering the period 1870 to 1919 and also meant to be translated into Russian, was published in 1919, at a time when Germany had already lost its colonial empire and when there existed at best some vague hopes to rebuild it. But already the title of the two-volume work reveals that it was again a European perspective that dominated — indeed, judging from the foreword to the second volume, one has to seriously question whether Darmstaedter ever travelled to sub-Saharan Africa. South West Africa, due to the inhospitableness of its territory long considered one of the ‘darkest’ regions of the large continent and only partially developed by missionaries since the 1840s, is given some attention in the second volume of Darmstaedter’s work. The account, however, whilst not focussing on the interests of the ‘colonial powers’ per se, is limited to a description of the activities of the European stakeholders in this sparsely populated and geographically challenging region. What this shows is that the writing of a history of indigenous South West Africa was at this time still well beyond the imagination of an author even like Darmstaedter.

As a provisional conclusion it can thus be stated that Africa, compared with the Americas and South Asia, played a clearly subordinate role among ‘overseas historians’ of the Wilhelmine era, as represented by Schäfer. Likewise, the only historian specializing in Africa, Darmstaedter, still limited his engagement with the ‘black continent’ to the colonial competition of the European powers there. What is apparent is that there existed neither an interest nor the expertise to explore and understand African ethnic groups, in other words to write a true history of Africa’s regions and people as yet.

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3 Dietrich Schäfer, Kolonialgeschichte, Leipzig, Göschens, 1903. See also his autobiography Mein Leben, Berlin, Leipzig, Köhler, 1926.

Ethnography

Thanks to the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft (German Colonial Society), which in 1900 launched a major initiative to convince the cultural bureaucracy of Germany’s respective principalities to lend greater support to the teaching of ethnology at their universities and to establish chairs in this new subject, which, in turn, were to further interest in colonial issues in the German Reich, the subject of ethnology soon gained in considerable strength and prestige and soon had much more of an impact in the general public. Still, none of the leading ethnologists either teaching at one of the universities or working in one of the large museums of ethnology could be described as an acknowledged authority of South West Africa. Among the museum bureaucrats working in Berlin, for example, all at the same time honorary or associate professors at the local university, none had a special expertise in this part of Africa: While Adolf Bastian (1826–1905) had some interest in West Africa and while Felix von Luschan (1854–1924) is said to have had some interest in the bushmen of the Kalahari, neither initiated noteworthy research expeditions into this region.

In general, it appears that German South West Africa attracted more interest among ethnologists outside rather than inside Germany. Indeed, the large research expeditions supported by the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft and the Reichskolonialamt (Imperial Colonial Office), often placed under some princely leadership, all had other destinations: Lake Chad, Cameroon, German New Guinea to name the most important ones. South West Africa remained a poor relation, most likely so as one did not expect to make any sensational discoveries or find any ‘advanced civilizations’ in this barren region. There hence was, to echo the general view at the time, nothing to be deciphered and described in some lavish publication, nothing that could have attracted much public attention.

Fortunately, there was at least one German ethnologist who took an active interest in South West Africa: Leo Frobenius (1873–1938). He was to have a decisive influence on the study of ethnology in Germany in the following decades and in 1904 planned a major, two-year long research expedition to the north of the German ‘protectorate’, more precisely to the narrow eastward protrusion known as the Caprivi Strip until recently. He cleverly justified his project on the basis of economic interest, referring to a study that set out how the indigenous population could be better integrated into the colonial processes of production. But this line of argument was only intended to convince the political decision-makers in the Imperial Colonial Office in Berlin to make available the requested sum from the so-called Africa Fund. In reality Frobenius wanted to pursue, supported by a travel companion trained in astronomy, the broad spectrum of conventional ethnological field research. Despite the numerous reference letters that

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5 The files of the Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft are to be found in: Bundesarchiv Berlin (BA), R 8023, Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft.

6 For Leo Frobenius and his envisaged expedition to German South West Africa see the files in BA, R 1001/1466, Forschungsreisen, vol. 1.
Frobenius provided, voices in Berlin soon had substantial misgivings, based, on the one hand, on the fact that the requested sum was widely seen to be far too small and, on the other hand, on the fact that the not uncontroversial explorer had never been to Africa before. In the end medical reports on Frobenius’s fitness for travel in the tropics were drawn upon to refuse his request. This, it appears, had also received little support from the administrative authorities in Windhoek, which no doubt feared, although far removed from the centres of the Herero War, the insecurity in the Caprivi Strip. The refusal of funds by Berlin disappointed and upset Frobenius, but his frustration was short-lived: just a few months later he successfully launched, supported by the Geographical Society in Berlin and the Museums of Ethnology in Hamburg and Leipzig, what came to be known in the history of ethnological research on Africa as the *Deutsche Inner-Afrikanische Forschungsexpedition* (DIAFE), i.e. the German Central-African Research Expedition. It therefore was ministry officials in Berlin, not knowing that Frobenius was soon to be part of Emperor Wilhelm II’s inner circle, who prevented that South West Africa, with a special focus on the Caprivi Strip, was to be the subject of Frobenius’s first research expedition to Africa.

The ethnographic discovery of the German ‘protectorate’ consequently remained the task of autodidacts and outsiders: German officers who were stationed with colonial troops in South West Africa, such as Streitwolf, Trenk and Drews, or men like the Austrian journalist Franz Seiner (1874–1929), who collected a wealth of materials on his travels and later successfully sold these, despite having been declared a *persona non grata* in Berlin and Windhoek, to various German institutions. As neither Berlin nor Windhoek initiated or supported any serious research on South West Africa, the ‘protectorate’ essentially remained ethnologically unknown whilst part of the German Reich. Instead German ethnologists took an interest in other regions, as far as Africa is concerned in East and West Africa. South West Africa thus remained an almost ‘forgotten region’ in the context of the German colonial empire.

**Linguistics**

In one respect, however, South West Africa offered a challenge to German cultural studies: in linguistics. Interest in the languages of the region expressed itself at two levels: that at home and that in the region.

In Germany it was, above all, the *Hamburger Kolonialinstitut* (Hamburg Colonial Institute), established upon the initiative of the Imperial Colonial Office in 1908 and the nucleus of the later university, which dedicated a large part of its teaching to the instruction of merchants and farmers. These were taught, often with the support of native speakers, far more than the basics needed to succeed overseas. Linguists like Dietrich Westermann (1875–1956) ensured that Hamburg became a leading centre worldwide with regard to African languages, whereby Westermann’s own monographs,

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dictionaries and grammar books focused on Central Africa rather than South West Africa. In class, however, the Herero language was always given due attention. The outstanding importance of the Hamburg Colonial Institute reflected in its launch of the respected series Deutsche Kolonialsprachen (German Colonial Languages) and Abhandlungen des Hamburger Kolonialinstituts (Papers from the Hamburg Colonial Institute) as well as the Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen (Journal of Colonial Languages) just before the outbreak of World War I. The latter publication, edited by the industrious linguist and ethnolinguist Carl Meinhof (1857–1944), also included articles on South West African languages, albeit few in number.

In this way linguistic research at the Hamburg Colonial Institute, always driven by a scientific impetus, clearly distinguished itself from the practice-oriented approach pursued at the Deutsche Kolonialschule für Landwirtschaft, Handel und Gewerbe (German Colonial School of Agriculture, Trade and Commerce) in Witzenhausen. While the school curriculum included next to cultural history and ethnology also foreign, including African languages, the focus was on language acquisition rather than scientific research into languages. The same appears to have been true of the majority of Germany’s universities, where the so-called new subject of colonial politics unmistakably gained in considerable strength in the first decade of the twentieth century. The respective degree courses not infrequently also included language courses, such as the ones taught at the Seminar für Orientalische Sprachen (Seminar for Oriental Languages) in Berlin.

The other level of linguistic research was that conducted locally. In the context of South West Africa Protestant missionaries played a pivotal role in this undertaking. There also existed, from 1896, a Catholic mission in the German ‘protectorate’; this was supported by the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate and in 1898 led to the establishment of the Diocese of Keetmanshoop. As far as linguistic research is concerned, however, the Lutheran missionaries sent by the Rhenish Missionary Society showed a much greater interest than their Catholic counterparts. Two of the Lutheran missionaries shall be introduced here in some further detail.

Pastor Carl Gotthilf Büttner (1848–1893), not without reason the subject of extensive biographical research in the 1990s, trained in Königsberg and Barmen, then served as a missionary inNama- and Damaraland from 1873 to 1880. During this time he also translated the New Testament into the Herero language. In 1885, in turn, the imperial government sent him to South West Africa to negotiate and conclude on behalf of the German Reich ‘friendship’ and ‘protection’ treaties with the various ethnic groups. Immediately before and during the latter stay he also published a number of texts on the geography of South West Africa and on various aspects of missionary practice there. Following his return to Germany and the award of an honorary doctorate by the University of Königsberg, he published another book in 1887, a so-called Hilfsbüchlein

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8 I am grateful to my colleague, Johannes Meier in Mainz for this information. As to the activities of the Catholic Church in South West Africa see also Heinz Hunke, Church and State. The Political Context of 100 Years of Catholic Mission in Namibia, Windhoek, Roman Catholic Church, 1996.
für den ersten Unterricht in der Suaheli-Sprache (Support Booklet for the First Lessons in the Suaheli Language).9

Like Büttner, Pastor Peter Heinrich Brincker (1836–1904) was also trained in Barmen. Following his ordination, he was tasked, in 1863, to convert Herero and Nama, two ethnic groups historically in conflict with one another. Operating from the mission in Otkikango, also called ‘Klein Barmen’, Brincker proved himself a very successful missionary, who also translated Protestant hymns into the Herero language. Having retired in 1889 from heading a teacher training school, which incidentally also served as a school of evangelism, he moved to Stellenbosch in South Africa from where he published numerous books on matters related to Africa: a dictionary and grammar of the Otjiherero dialect, a dictionary and grammar of the Otjikwanyama dialect, readings in the Herero language, a dictionary of the Herero language, and a German phrasebook for the Bantu dialects Otjiherero, Oshindonga and Otjikwanyama in South West Africa. Likewise his translation of the New Testament, Luther’s Catechism and the four canonical gospels into various local languages is worth mentioning. There is little doubt that Brincker opened up a new chapter in research on the Herero languages.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be stated that German historians of the Wilhelmine era approached Africa only with much reluctance. In the rare case where they took an interest in the continent, they did so from the perspective of ‘Europe in Africa’ rather than with the aim of wanting to write a history of one or several of Africa’s many societies. This disinterest most likely derived from the fact that sub-Saharan Africa was generally seen to lack written sources and, thus, culture. Indeed, most historians thought that time was not yet ripe to conduct research in this remote part of the world. In contrast, German ethnologists of the Wilhelmine era generally considered ‘black’ Africa a positive challenge. This did not include South West Africa, however, which long remained in the shadow of other areas of interest. The most enduring academic contribution to research on South West Africa was therefore made by linguists, those who worked at the Hamburg Colonial Institute,10 but also the missionaries who researched the Herero as well as Nama and Damara languages locally. Their publications long remained undisputed points of reference in the field. Overall the strong emotional link that many Germans had with South West Africa thus reflected only faintly in the research in cultural studies conducted during the Wilhelmine era.


10 For a recent publication on this topic see Sara Pugach, Africa in Translation: A History of Colonial Linguistics in Germany and Beyond, 1814–1945, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2012.
Bibliography


