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Review: Julia Rensing, Lorena Rizzo and Wanda Rutishauser, (eds.), *Sites of Contestation. Encounters with the Ernst and Ruth Dammann Collection in the Archives of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2021.

The Ernst and Ruth Dammann Collection is a compilation of over 8100 images and 750 audio recordings, manuscripts, diaries and notes, collected during a nine months research trip in Erongo Region of present-day Namibia, between 1953 and 1954. The theologian and Africanist Ernst Dammann together with his wife Ruth, who assisted mostly by making the recordings and taking photographs, researched African languages and narratives, and his collection is an archive of language documents, songs, voices and oral literature, pictures and biographies of almost 200 individuals. In 2000, Dammann transferred the documents to the Basler Afrika Bibliographien. In 2020, the collection became a subject of the seminar “Photography and History in Southern Africa” at the University of Basel. The Visual History Lab of the Basler Afrika Bibliographien in collaboration with the Museums Association of Namibia opened the collection online to a broader audience, thus making it accessible to Namibians including those individuals and families of individuals who featured in the research.¹ *Sites of Contestation* is a volume consisting of five essays by the students of the two above mentioned seminars from the University of Basel. The essays illuminate the documents against their colonial background, the political attitude

and interests of the Dammanns as well as the respective genres. All the essays address not only the uniqueness of the documents, but also their problematic context due to political structures and ethnographic interest. Dammann's National Socialist background and his connections to Christian missions in South Africa which supported the apartheid policy against Namibians, are also examined in the analysis of these historical documents for their influence on perspectives and research methods. In all the essays, however, the authors express and discuss their subjective thoughts and feelings, which gives the scientific approaches and examinations a personal note.

In their introduction, Julia Rensing and Wanda Rutishauser present an overview of the Ernst and Ruth Dammann Collection, the background to the volume and aspects that guided the critical examination of this fascinating yet complex and problematic collection. The five essays not only cover different documents, but also feature different approaches, thereby demonstrating a variety of ways of dealing with such a colonial archive. To read “the past anew” is suggested in the title “Sites of Contestation”, as Rensing and Rutishauser state (p. 10). The edited photo on the cover of the volume is supposed to reflect this new view or reassessment: The photograph shows Ernst Dammann and the background – the Namibian landscape – in the original black and white, while the indigenous population have been coloured (by Julia Rensing). This use of colour to highlight the Namibian people suggests a new focus on the people and

¹ See: <https://namibia1953.com>

their biographies and not on the mere images and recordings. Whether this colouring achieves its goal is debatable, but it definitely challenges the problematic material and raises the awareness of the ethical obligations when engaging with a colonial archive as well as of a shift of focus.

In the first essay “On Wide Open Plains – Traces of Resilience in Namibian Oral Storytelling”, Naemi Hüberli begins with the description of an audio recording and reflects on her very ambivalent associations: a story that is being told, a song that is being sung, sounding both old and new, sounding timeless, a feeling of intimacy, but of wide landscapes, a cheerfulness and seriousness – all at the same time. She deals with a rather neglected genre and in her personal interpretation, she tries to turn former objects into subjects by seeing the performance or recording as resistance or recognizing signs of resistance because the speakers were free to choose what to present. Storytelling and orature are deeply anchored in the traditions of the various Namibian cultures; they transport indigenous knowledge and are understood to be an emotional outlet. It is precisely this aspect that was neglected by the linguist Dammann, who, according to Hüberli, concentrated on all linguistic aspects, thus creating a tension between the presentation and the methodological inaptitude and his unfamiliarity of the complexity of the genre. The recordings are not only to be seen as an answer to a question – that of the German scientist – but also as an invitation issued and accepted. According to the author, the presentation also invites one to look for traces that open up alternative possibilities, especially in the

analysis of additional utterances that can be heard in the recordings, i.e. between the recorder and the recorded or the comments from the audience. The fact that storytelling is still part of Namibian culture is evident in the performances of spoken word artists, who also deal with the question of identity and Western influences.

The second essay, “Worlds Apart? Biographies and Interventions in the Dammann Collection”, by Julia Rensing, concentrates on the colonial photographs from the collection and their ethical implications. Rensing examines selected images taking the biographical narratives and questioning to what extent they differ. She asks whether the photographs serve one’s own biography – the construction of whiteness – or the ethnographic depiction of the indigenous population – i.e. the representation of one’s own and the others in the Namibian (social) landscape. With the help of Ruth Dammann’s diary, Rensing locates the images and offers insights into the colonial and thus racist way of thinking. She succeeds in presenting the Dammanns’ own portrayal as a colonial representation of whiteness and “empty space”, reminiscent of the common colonial settler tropes. Rensing contrasts this colonial whiteness of the “inward gaze” with the “outward gaze” by introducing a photograph that presents an anonymous and ethicizing depiction. However, the images and descriptions of Bernhard and Elisabeth Kahiiko, a pastor and his wife, who present themselves self-confidently in Western clothing and as intellectuals, depict a relationship that is not quite asymmetrical. Here Rensing analyzes in particular the additional statements and narratives that allow glimpses

of the context and the interpersonal communication beyond the recorded presentations. She thus shows that the Dammanns' encounters – even if they represent the colonial white researcher and a different world along the “colour line” (p. 57) – are not only asymmetrical, distant and impersonal, but were also challenged.

The third essay by Natasha Collier approaches the collection from the perspective that was intended by the Dammanns – namely, a study of linguistics and literature. In her essay, however, she looks at the collection against Tolkien's theory of fairy tales. Under the aspects of origins (history), children (audience), fantasy (genre), recovery, escape and consolation (purpose), the article first deals with the history of Namibia and the beginning of German colonization. In addition, she presents the comprehensive and meticulously documented Dammann collection. A large number of the recorded stories entail images of jackals and hyenas, which are a major element of traditional African storytelling. Furthermore, the author addresses different representations in photos and describes the diametrical contrast in the images that portray the Dammanns – working, giving and tilling land, while the African people are shown as passive, starving and weak. Finally, she addresses the oppressive apartheid state that follows the German colonial era and is interpreted as myth-making under which the oppression of the African population was justified. She sees the eucatastrophe of Tolkien's fairy tale in the opportunity to hear and interpret the 750 sound recordings in the collection in a new way. The article thus not only takes a rather

unusual way of interpreting this collection through the fairy tale lens which offers a different but convincing perspective. At the same time, the author herself adopts fairy tale elements in her presentation and in addressing the reader.

The next essay by Wanda Rutishauser reconstructs the biographies of women who were portrayed by Ernst and Ruth Dammann in photographs and recordings, and who are also mentioned in their diaries and publications. She explores narratives in this colonial archive, where information is sparse and one has to be aware of the discrepancy between lived lives and told lives. Rutishauser focuses on one Herero woman in particular – Adelheid Mbuandjou, who the Dammanns met in Omaruru in 1954 and who told stories and presented songs and dances. Meanwhile, the author precisely describes Dammann's presence in the recording through his comments and cataloguing, in which she also identifies errors and refers to the incompleteness of the material. On the other hand, the chapter lets the women, and Adelheid Mbuandjou specifically, speak as it quotes the songs in Herero and English translation. It thus enables a very direct insight into the stories and lives of the women and shows how memories and experiences of war or violence are passed on. These depictions can also be seen as resistance to and protest against colonialism, and as documents in which Namibian women “are speaking back to power” (p. 93). In a further step, she describes the photos – some in colour – which show the women's self-confidence and willingness and thus – according to Rutishauser – also their power. However, Adelheid Mbuandjou's German father represents the traces of

German history in Namibia not only in the colonial archive and life stories, but also in the lives of the individuals themselves. By contacting Adelheid Mbuandjou's family in Namibia via social media, Rutishauser was able to expand the biography and present an impressive and extraordinary life story of a Namibian woman in colonial and post-colonial times.

The volume concludes with the essay "The Image-Text Event: Framing Famine in Namibia in 1953" by Natalia Krzysztofek and Vishruti Shastri, which deals with the famine in Northern Namibia in the 1950s, as documented in the Dammann Collection. The documentation of the famine as well as the food donations and distributions, are more of a by-product of the work of the Dammanns, who came to know about the drought that resulted in famine while on their journey through Namibia. Against the background of famine and food shortages in Ovamboland in Northern Namibia, the essay concentrates mainly on its depiction in written and pictorial documents of the 20th century. The pictures taken by Ruth Dammann, which are in the Dammann Collection photo albums, must be seen as colonial representations. This is because they were created in the course of a colonial project and came from the perspective of a white elite, a biased view that at the same time prompts the question as to how much "submerged history" (p. 115) or counter statements can be derived from such an undertaking. The essay also illustrates the material in the collection with some photographs and excerpts from Dammann's diary. In the analysis of these documents, the authors explore the depiction of the indigenous people and their discomfort, and recognize through

her diary that is Ruth Dammann is part of the hierarchical structure and that her pictures can be classified in the tradition of depicting 'native life' as the authors conclude.

These five essays present very different topics and questions reflecting the diversity and possibilities of the Ernst and Ruth Dammann Collection. They also illustrate the dangers and opportunities of such a colonial archive, which all authors deal with very critically and consciously. All the essays show the great passion and the personal interest in individual topics and the evaluation of the collection. At the same time, the essays indicate that a critical, enriching assessment to the highest scientific standards combined with a very personal impetus is effective and valuable. The volume can be seen as a supplement, response and critical commentary to Ernst Dammann's 1987 publication *Was Herero erzählten und sagen: Texte, Übersetzung und Kommentar*. However, the volume also shows how one can deal with a colonial archive in the 21st century – despite the pandemic – ; how images, audio recordings, manuscripts, diaries and notes taken from a colonial white, often male perspective entail different aspects when read anew. A big compliment to all those who were involved in the project(s) as well as those who made the publication possible. This shows the potential of young and aspiring researchers and that a university seminar can go far beyond mere term papers and credit points.

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