
Among the diverse fragments of German colonial visual culture to resurface in recent years is the *Sammlung Schlüter Deutsch-Südwestafrika*, a collection of 281 photographs exhibited by the *Braunschweigisches Landesmuseum* in 2007. What makes this collection especially compelling is not only its contents — in part an original photographic documentation of Namibia at the turn of the twentieth century — but also the particular circumstances of its formation and use. The collection suggests a quotidian and subaltern form of colonial knowledge and visual culture circulating independently of the licensed, institutionalized colonialism of the day. At one level a kind of visual record, it is also an artifact of colonization “from below.” It can tell us something of how the colony was experienced, apprehended, visually fixed in the protracted encounter of an “ordinary” German with the world of southwest Africa, even as it tells us much about the colony itself.

Hermann Schlüter was hardly a typical photographer, explorer or collector of the fin-de-siècle. The son of a railroad conductor in Braunschweig, he was twenty when, in 1896, he went to the German colony of Southwest Africa as a volunteer with the *Schutztruppe*, taking along a basic travel camera. Five years later he returned to his native city and set up as a florist. Schlüter seems himself to have made and brought back from Africa about 180 of the 281 photographic negatives, prints and glass-plate positives that comprise the collection. The rest were made by others and collected by him in Germany, many already published and well known. The compact, handsome catalogue reproduces the photographs themselves and contextualizes them historically and biographically in a brief introductory essay by Wulf Otte. (It also includes a fold-out color reproduction of a 1905 map of the colony.)

Schlüter’s pictures are in many ways unsurprising; carefully composed and framed scenes of colonial life and landscape, row upon row of serialized soldiers and “savages”, reproduce European modes of seeing colonial Africa that had become conventionalized over the preceding century. They range over much of the colony, suggesting that Schlüter was stationed mostly in Damaraland, near the Swakopmund-Windhoek railroad, and further to the north, in the territory of the Bergdamara, but also in the northern reaches of the colony, on the border between Ovamboland and Portuguese Angola. Images of hunting trophies, of African servants on verandahs, of palm trees (long since logoized in colonial iconography) confirm expectations about the *Kolonialreich* flowing from the endless repetitions of the new mass visual culture.

And still they hold our interest: these pictures of everyday life in the colony, the missionary wives and ubiquitous beer bottles and cigars, the teams of oxen and black evangelists, the merrymaking and musical instruments, white leisure and black labor. Concerned formally — compositionally — to har-
monize, Schlüter nevertheless records, as he must, something of the strange tensions and contradictions of colonial life: its racialized hierarchies of master and servant coexisting with the quotidian intimacies of black and white. The instances of material culture and technology that simultaneously evoke both colonial mastery and its tenuousness and absurdity: the tiny narrow-gage railroad, the Swakopmund “harbor” that is only a beach, insignificant outposts in vast landscapes, like the strange, desolate fortress that is the Omaruru post office, its crenellated tower echoing the turreted Windhoek fort, or the absurdity of the Rehoboth “police station” in a wilderness of dust and thorns.

Here was an almost unimaginably distant and alien world, a true adventure for a young man of petit-bourgeois origins from a provincial city with few prospects of travel. But Schlüter’s own story warns us against making too much of that stock character: the uneducated, parochial Kleinbürger who knows little of the world beyond hometown and Heimat—or, here, the exception to that rule. The vicissitudes of empire in the late nineteenth century set all sorts of people in motion and linked the remotest corners of the globe. The adventurous Schlüter was in so many ways ordinary: lower middle-class, a common soldier, an amateur photographer. He was also surprisingly sophisticated, talented, with energy and initiative. His superiors took him seriously enough to make him responsible for photographic documentation of an expedition into Ovamboland. Many of his photographs stand out: the striking vertical repetitions of standing Ovambo girls holding tall pestles in an enclosure of taller grass; the play of texture and form in an Ovambo granary; the crisp, almost brittle clarity of a portrait of children at Grootfontein, their pyramidal composition subtly mirrored by the inverted pyramid of the palms behind them; the dense atmospherics and narrative texture of a Schutztruppe barracks scene, almost a film still.

And when he returned to Braunschweig, Schlüter continued to collect images of Southwest Africa, often from books and magazines. He even published a few of his own photos. When the Herero revolt erupted in 1904, Schlüter went so far as to produce a public lantern-slide lecture, his shows announced and enthusiastically reviewed in local Braunschweig papers. While it’s not clear whether this was a commercial venture, he did sell tickets at least once, having pledged part of the profit to the cause of the soldiers fighting in Southwest Africa. In this way, Schlüter joined the ranks of itinerant lecturers — experts, explorers, colonial luminaries, missionaries — who plied the national circuit of local learned societies and voluntary associations with their magic-lantern slides. The German Colonial Society was a leading sponsor of such lectures, but nothing suggests Schlüter had any link with the local chapter. He was certainly not a member. Given the ways that the fundamentally bourgeois colonial movement tended to reproduce the class divisions of Wilhelmine society, this is not surprising. Indeed, Schlüter’s photograph collection and lantern-slide lectures mirrored bourgeois practice but
belonged ultimately to a parallel world of grassroots colonialism, of travelling showmen and small-town veterans and would-be settlers.

But this colonialism “from below” appears ultimately to retrace the common visual experience of bourgeois colonialists. If origin, class, rank or training again and again signify Schlüter’s subordinate position, colonialism seems to have elevated and empowered him. Even a lowly soldier in Southwest Africa attains the status of colonizer, and, moreover, his experiences in Africa license him to speak with authority at home. In any event, colonial convention marks these photographs. The serialized portraits, for example: white men line up – officers on horseback, soldiers on a ship’s deck – self-consciously posing, versus rows of Nama, San or Herero lined up, posed for inspection. A group of Ovambo girls and women carefully arranged to be seen frontally, in profile and from behind, or a pair of photos of an Ovambo man and woman, frontal and profile, exemplify Schlüter’s absorption of the ethnographic style. Two other images, of cattle and of a family seated before a dwelling almost indistinguishable from the acacia thicket and parched grasses that surround it, appear uncannily miniaturized – dioramic rather than photographic. The perfect compositional balance, granularity of detail and crystalline depth suggest a view of Southwest Africa mediated through European modes of visuality (Timothy Mitchell’s world-as-picture). The subaltern Schlüter is the exception that proves the rule: all too typical in seeing the world as if at the diorama, reflecting a much broader photographic confirmation of colonial “reality” streaming endlessly to a capitalist mass culture hungry for novelty – even as repetition.

The photographs fascinate, and they tell us a great deal, but stuck as they are in a kind of routinized, conventionalized visual system, in the perpetual confirmation of colonial expectations, they could hardly reframe, disrupt or renew the contemporary view of the colony. They barely hint at the fundamental violence of colonial Namibia, at the tensions bred by the continuous expropriation of indigenous lands, antagonisms that had erupted in conflict with the Nama two years before Schlüter’s arrival and that would erupt again, with extraordinary viciousness, a few years after his departure. The images of colonial hierarchy, order, military formation, serialized figures, technology and evangelism suggest something of the radical transformation of southwestern Africa, but for the most part occlude a reality of shifting coalitions, mistrust, building resentments and pressures. A portrait of a “native with gun” seems benign, hardly portending the spectacular revolt of 1904. An 1896 shot of vanquished Kaimuane prisoners in chains is all but just another group portrait. Only retrospectively, after 1907, could it seem to anticipate the infamous concentration camps of the German conflict with the Herero and Nama. Schlüter brings us the colony up close — and yet always holds it at a distance.

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