
Book Reviews

AFRICA

Annie Joubert (in collaboration with Gerrie Grobler, Inge Kosch and Lize Kriel). *Ethnography from the Mission Field: The Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge*. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2015. 1145 pp. ISBN: 9789004297722. \$301.00.

In *Ethnography from the Mission Field*, Annie Joubert and her collaborators collect and assess the writings of Carl Hoffmann, a German Lutheran missionary who ministered among Northern Sotho communities in South Africa and Zimbabwe. This multistage project produced three interlinked products: the book under review, a documentary (i.e., *A Journey into the Life of a Mission-Ethnographer*) and a digital database (i.e., *The Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge*). The book—which features contributions from Joubert, Gerrie Grobler, Inge Kosch, and Lize Kriel—is the culmination of an interdisciplinary effort to reproduce and situate Hoffmann’s corpus within a variety of historical, anthropological, literary and linguistic contexts.

Carl Hoffmann was born in 1868 in Zielenzig (Prussia) to a petite bourgeois family. Initially trained as a letterpress setter, his intense personal religiosity drew him to missionary work. In 1889, Hoffmann travelled to Berlin and entered the Lutheran mission house there. Subsequently, he joined the Berlin Mission Society in Berlin-Friedrichshain. After finishing his training in 1894, the young missionary sailed for Africa, landed at Cape Town and headed north to the Transvaal to begin his work. Hoffmann’s first posting was in Mashonaland (present-day Southern Zimbabwe), followed by a period at the Arkona Mission in Sekhukhuneland (present-day Northeastern South Africa). Here Hoffmann began collecting the folktales of the Northern Sotho people and extensively studying their language. In 1904, Hoffmann relocated to the Mphome-Kratzenstein Mission in Northern Kratzenstein, where he remained for the following three decades. He produced the majority of his ethnographic research and writings during his time at Mphome-Kratzenstein. Hoffmann developed strong relationships with a variety of Sotho interlocutors and assiduously recorded regional oral literature, proverbs, marriage rituals and other customary practices. He explored Northern Sotho orthography with native “collaborators” like Raubaas Mogashwa and Moses Rakoma and, in the process, created what Joubert calls a “decisive space for the co-production of cultural knowledge.”¹ Hoffmann also published a small newspaper, created baptism and catechism documents in the Northern Sotho language, initiated programs to train African missionaries, wrote biographies of Northern Sotho notables and contributed articles to German scholarly journals like

¹ *A Journey into the Life of a Mission-Ethnographer* (2015) directed by Annie Joubert (http://figshare.com/articles/A_Journey_into_the_Life_of_a_Mission_Ethnographer/1375528).

Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen. He left Mphome-Kratzenstein in 1934 and was appointed head of the Lutheran Mission Church in South Africa. Hoffmann retired in Pietersburg (present-day Polokwane) in 1943 but continued publishing until 1958. During his life, Hoffmann acted as a “frontier broker” between European and indigenous cultures and compiled the “first materially-produced corpus of Northern Sotho oral literature in its original form.”² He died in 1962 at age 94.

The bulk of *Ethnography from the Mission Field* is a thoroughly annotated collection of Hoffmann’s ethnographic articles published between 1913 and 1958. Each is presented in modern standardised Northern Sotho alongside an English translation, with copious annotations on “orthographic, linguistic, folkloric, cultural, and historic information” (75). The articles, co-productions between Hoffmann and his Sotho interlocutors, cover a range of topics and include: rites of passage for men and women, mythology and folklore, social customs, shamanic and totemic rituals and beliefs, laws and governance and general guidelines for conducting oneself in daily life. Three articles from 1937-38, for example, spell out the myriad social contracts between husband and wife, foreigner and native, ruler and ruled and so forth (698-829). Hoffmann’s final series of articles, published between 1956 and 1958, lay out rules for building homes, keeping domestic animals, treating guests, holding feasts and even comment on suicide and adultery (832-1041). The sum of Hoffmann’s ethnographic work is at once a profoundly nuanced portrait of Northern Sotho life and traditions and an act of cultural preservation in the face of colonial modernity—including the very missionary work Hoffmann participated in. As in other colonial environments, liberal-minded missionaries like Carl Hoffmann simultaneously became enamoured of native traditions while attempting to re-pattern them. Hoffmann’s ethnographic articles are compendiums of Sotho customs and fail to address this tension but his diaries, available through the database, are more reflective.³

Framing Hoffmann’s extensive corpus are contextual essays. Lize Kriel examines Hoffmann’s project of constructing the “pre-colonial historical memory” of the Northern Sotho people (15). She places Hoffmann’s work against larger trends in German colonial knowledge production, considers the role of missionaries in facilitating apartheid and argues that Hoffmann’s discussions with his African collaborators can be “read as a discourse in reflective nostalgia—reminiscences of the ways things were; not for the sake of recovering the past or forestalling change, but more as a manifestation of cultural memory, a critical base, from where the modern world could be engaged” (18). Hoffmann published in the journal *Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen*, which was run by the linguist Carl Meinhof, a founder of *Africanistik* and an enthusiastic proponent of the German colonial project. As such, Hoffmann contributed to a body of knowledge steeped in biological notions of race and ideologically predisposed towards empire (24-25). A product of his time, Hoffmann believed that the European and African could not “share the same spiritual life” (32). Rather, Africans should adopt Christian principles and combine them with their own cultural practices. In Hoffmann, we see many of the contradictions and complications of colonial missionary work writ large. Willing to live among the Sotho people and appreciative of their traditions in ways many secular administrators were not, Hoffmann participated in “the attempt to convert and change as much as to assert the humanity of the other” (40). Here Kriel borrows Jane Samson’s notion

² Ibid.

³ The Hoffman Collection of Cultural Knowledge (HC-CK) database is open to the public on the Humboldt University of Berlin website (<https://rs.cms.hu-berlin.de/hoffmanncollection/pages/home.php>).

of “brothering” (as opposed to “othering”). Indeed, Hoffmann advocated for the ordination of African clergymen and, most importantly, not only credited his Sotho co-producers but also wrote biographies of different regional figures for a German audience. “We would like to think it possible,” Kriel writes, “that the African interlocutors, through their collaboration with Hoffmann, may have been appropriating Meinhof’s nationalistic and imperialistic project as a transnational vehicle to record and affirm their knowledge and views” (44). A helpful essay by Inge Kosch at the end of the book maps Hoffmann’s orthographic developments and there are a number indexes listing people, places and terms used in the missionary’s writings (1049–1145).

The documentary portion of this impressive research project is suitable for a general audience as an introduction to Hoffmann, while *Ethnography in the Mission Field* and the *Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge* database will be more useful to specialists. This includes, but is not limited to, historians of colonial missionary work, linguists, cultural anthropologists, those studying African oral literary traditions and historical sociologists. Taken as a whole, the project is a remarkable effort to preserve and make accessible important archival materials from an understudied place and time. Thoughtfully contextualized and assembled, the book and database will no doubt serve as a valuable scholarly resource for years to come.

doi:10.1017/S0165115315000674

Oliver Charbonneau, *Western University*

Rachel Bright. *Chinese Labour in South Africa, 1902–1910: Race, Violence and Global Spectacle*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave, 2013. 266 pp. ISBN 9780230303775. \$100.00.

During the first decade of the twentieth century, as the new British colony of the Transvaal sought to recover economically from the South African War (1899–1902) that had led to its incorporation into the empire, a coalition of mining interests and government officials hatched a plan to overcome a perceived labour shortage in the gold mines by importing workers from China. Between 1904 and 1907 63,695 indentured Chinese workers were brought to the Transvaal. But by 1907 white public opinion had turned against the program both in Great Britain—where a new government had been voted into power in 1906 partly on the strength of its opposition to Chinese indentured labour—and in the Transvaal, where the first act of a newly empowered legislature in 1907 was to cancel the scheme. In January 1910 the last of the Chinese workers were returned to China.

In *Chinese Labour in South Africa*, Bright explores the process through which the Chinese labour migration scheme moved from unlikely beginning to rapid decline. Despite its title, the book is not for the most part a history of Chinese workers in South Africa—its focus is the *idea* of Chinese labour in South Africa and, most significantly, the impact of that idea on the evolution of the British Empire during the early twentieth century. Bright makes a strong claim for its importance in this context, arguing that it played a unique role in defining the relationships between Britain and its “white” colonies and among the settler societies by pushing them to articulate beliefs about “matters of self-governance, imperial citizenship, and national and imperial federation” (4). The sub-title “Race, Violence and Global Spectacle” describes the lenses through which Bright has approached this episode. She uses it to investigate the intersection of several global networks: not only the links between South African mining