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Anette Hoffmann, *Knowing by Ear: Listening to Voice Recordings with African Prisoners of War in German Camps (1915–1918)*. Publisher: Duke University Press, 2024, 181 pages. ISBN # 9781478059028.

Reviewed by: Oyinade Adekunle, McMaster University.

In this groundbreaking work, Hoffmann ventures beyond traditional archival research methods, delving into the rarely examined realm of voice and sound recordings. This innovative approach provides a detailed and nuanced account of the lives and experiences of African prisoners in German camps during World War I. By focusing on voice recordings, Hoffmann sheds light on the personal narratives and daily realities of these prisoners, offering a fresh perspective on their struggles and resilience. The book is meticulously structured, beginning with a prologue that sets the stage for the ensuing exploration.

The introduction provides a comprehensive overview of the historical context and the significance of the chosen archival sources. The three main chapters delve deeply into various aspects of the prisoners' lives, from their capture and internment to their interactions as prisoners of war (POWs). Each chapter is rich with detail, drawing on the sound recordings to bring the voices of these African soldiers to life. The afterword reflects on the broader implications of the study, emphasizing the importance of including these often-overlooked voices in the historical narrative.

In this book, Hoffmann guides readers through the process of colonial knowledge production, from the initial processing to the interpretation of archival data. The author undertakes the translation of various audio recordings made by African soldiers, engaging deeply with these recordings through thorough analysis. The “collection of acoustic recordings of POWs held at the Berlin Lautarchiv” (5) serves as the book's foundation, underscoring the critical importance of preserving history.

Hoffmann also highlights the protocols for recording and documentation and delves into the complexities of close listening. The significance of memory is brought to the forefront through the detailed recordings provided by survivors, prisoners, and internees, particularly in discussions about the presence of African soldiers in Germany during World War I. The author illustrates how acoustic fragments can piece together historical events and human experiences.

In Chapters One and Two, Hoffmann follows Abdoulaye Niang's journey as an African soldier in Europe during World War I, exploring various archival materials related to Niang and Mohamed Nur's intellectual and political activities in Germany and Somalia. The author emphasizes the importance of oral sources, such as songs, chants, and storytelling, noting that "song and spoken records speak of life in the camps, homesickness, loneliness, uncertainty, and fear" (43). Hoffmann also addresses the challenges posed by language barriers during recording, where "questions could not be communicated, and answers were not understood (or both)" (38). Consequently, the author advises caution when analyzing historical sound recordings.

Hoffmann's work vividly illustrates the racial bias inherent in the African colonial experience, which is evident in the recordings. This bias is exemplified by the racialization and depersonalization of POWs during and after the recording process. The author explores systemic racism in Germany and the false portrayal of Africa as backward, heathen, evil, and dark. Hoffmann highlights the segregation in German camps, such as the assignment of black internees to a specific barrack (Barrack 13), and the racialization of drum languages. Beyond racial bias, Hoffmann addresses themes such as the historiographies of war, the silence of sources, imprisonment, colonization, colonial legacies, and violent exploits.

In Chapter Three, Hoffmann details the violence of colonial domination and the use of drum languages as a source of oral history. The author emphasizes the importance of tone, pitch, and intonation in language, noting how these elements can significantly impact translation and historical documentation. Spirit languages, which were encoded and unintelligible to colonial powers, posed a barrier to Western knowledge production, creating challenges for German linguists, missionaries, and colonial administrators. The voices of African prisoners recorded reflect the evangelizing mission, economic undertones of colonial activities, and exploitation of African colonies. The acquisition of ethnographic objects, currently present in museums, also contributes to piecing together historical events.

Perhaps the central point is that voice recordings can reveal and speak to colonial pasts through the voices of migrants and prisoners in Germany during World War I. Hoffmann meticulously details the knowledge production in German POW camps, challenging established Eurocentric narratives that either glorify European actors or omit and misrepresent African human agency. The author advocates for systemic restitution, emphasizing the importance of returning properties and artifacts to colonized societies. This includes the Lautarchiv, which houses recordings of African prisoners, and museums that display sound arts and artifacts of African prisoners without returning them to their home countries.

The author emphasizes the vital role of archives and knowledge repositories in preserving history, showcasing how the resources at the Lautarchiv of Humboldt University in Berlin were instrumental in creating this significant work. Hoffmann draws on a diverse array of sources, including phonographic recordings by German linguists and acoustic recordings of stories, songs, narratives, and prayers. The inclusion of images further enriches the research quality. Hoffmann goes beyond traditional literature to consult museums, sound archives, and broadcasting services. Also, Hoffmann tackles the challenges of language translation and transliteration, as many recordings were translated from various languages into English. This complex process, involving over one hundred recordings in nine languages, raises concerns about potential errors or loss of information during translation, questioning the originality and accuracy of the testimonies—whether some were omitted, exaggerated, or misconstrued.

Hoffmann sheds light on the evolution of historiography by recognizing spoken and sung texts as historical sources, highlighting the absence of acoustic traces or oral archives in German histories. The author notes that only recently has the involvement of colonial soldiers in World War I become a more regular part of its historiography. Hoffmann employs a multidisciplinary approach, integrating history, anthropology, linguistics, war studies, and art history.

This work not only amplifies the voices of African soldiers, who have been largely overlooked in German war history and similar narratives but also challenges readers to reconsider the sources and methods used in historical research. It is a significant contribution to the field, offering a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of World War I and the lived experiences of Africans through voice recordings.

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