In and from the Field: A Journey into the Life of a ‘Mission-Ethnographer’ and His Co-Producers

Annekie Joubert

1 Introduction

My interest in missionary Hoffmann stems from the time I was doing research on the oral traditions of the Hananwa and Lobedu people in South Africa in the early 1990s. As I was exploring various archives in Germany and South Africa I often came across the name Carl Hoffmann. His writings, drawings and photos leave one with an impression of the large number of people he had come into contact with. Almost all these people had been encountered in the ‘field’ which Hoffmann had missionised during his long career, covering various areas in what is today the south of Zimbabwe and the north of South Africa, specifically the present-day Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces. The realisation that many of these people would otherwise not have made it into any historical record, affected me deeply and I embarked upon a research project to find out who this man was.

I initiated the project from the Seminar for African Studies at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, where I am based, and I chose to collaborate with South African scholars from a number of different disciplines. The knowledge and insight resulting from this collaboration have become central to our understanding of the work of Hoffmann and his co-producers. Our research team has been working on the “Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge” since 2010. The working title of this project used to be the “Hoffmann Collection of Northern Sotho Cultural Heritage”. This title received considerable critical attention at our workshop “Past[ssed?] Encounters Visual(ised) and Digital(ised): On Archiving Colonial Knowledge” in October 2012 at the University of Pretoria. The discussions highlighted the problems around the designation of particular tribal identities and the tendency to conflate linguistic classification and ethnic identification.1 Also under consideration was the extent to which the notion of ‘heritage’ (much as it enables the appropriation of ethnographic knowledge by

---

1 As explained by Harries (2005, 224): “The reification of an idea (a linguistic category invented by human beings) into a social group (a natural tribe or race) had important political consequences.”
the former colonial subjects for their own self-affirmation) forecloses a critical interrogation of the historical processes through which linguistic, tribal and ethnic categories had been constructed. As a team we concluded that the collection addresses more than Northern Sotho cultural heritage, and for that reason we decided for the more even-handed title "Hoffmann Collection of Cultural Knowledge" (hc-ck). Between the years 1894 and 1943 missionary Carl Hoffmann, together with a number of local co-workers, gathered an unrivalled collection of narrations and images from within the orbit of Hoffmann's mission field (most of it during Hoffmann's three decades-long stay on the Mphome-Kratzenstein mission station amongst the people of Mamabolo). This material is still scattered in various institutions in Germany and South Africa today. Our scientific goal is to provide vital tools for entry into the Hoffmann Collection. This we try to achieve through the publication of this book, supplemented by a film and comprehensive database. However, the hc-ck also has the collective goal of securing the recordings of the oral narrations by the people missionary Hoffmann had encountered, and by making it accessible for future research. The project also aims at safeguarding and disseminating this collection of threatened resources through new technology such as filming and digitisation, and to make it more accessible through the bilateral exchange of the material in digital format between Germany and South Africa.

Working with the material in the Hoffmann Collection over the last number of years, revealed the confluence of media and intermedial spaces where we as researchers found ourselves in-between and within the mixing of time, space, media as well as old and new realities. This was brought about by the nature of the material which includes handwritten diaries and notes, oral transcriptions in an outdated orthography, printed scientific articles, essays and books, sketches, black and white analogue photographs, digital photos, as well as digital film. In order to be able to deal with, and explore the notion of intermediality, it was necessary to follow an interdisciplinary approach where each researcher could focus on his/her specialised field and explore the multi-sidedness of the material in the Hoffmann Collection which comprises linguistics, oral literature, cultural anthropology, religion, mission history and visual culture. Images in a number of media constitute a substantial component of the Hoffmann Collection and I have tried to give due recognition to that by assimilating both image and text into an interlinking visual network of chronologies and narratives. I hope, through the use of film, to open up new creative and visual historiography that would allay past and present apprehensions.