

Listening to the Archive. Historical Voice Recordings as Sources for Historiographies of the Colonial Period

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Since the introduction of phonography in the late 19th century linguists, anthropologists, musicologists and folklorists produced what are now historical recordings with non-European people. Collected to study and salvage foreign languages and cultural expressions, many collections were digitized in recent years. With few exceptions these acoustic files have rarely been made use of for the writing of historiographies. Often the (first) translation of historical recordings retrieves narratives, fragments of discourses, comments, critique, or accounts that are yet to be claimed as historical sources. Yet the spoken texts claim documentary status: one can hear a prisoner of war protest against his deportation, a farm worker speak of colonial wars, a man send regards to Germany. These historical recordings are not simply voices from the past. Rather, they are archival echoes shaped by genres, modes of production, and the performativity of voice. Close listening, and listening beyond the constrictions of the rationale of the disciplines for which these acoustic sources once were created, retrieves their potential as historical sources in their own right. On the basis of recordings of three distinct collections (from South Africa 1908, Germany 1915-18, Namibia 1954) this project presents acoustic documents as alternative sources or historical narratives that are otherwise absent in the biased written documentation of the colonial archive.

Projektbeteiligte

Dr. Anette Hoffmann

Humboldt-Universität Berlin
Institut für Kulturwissenschaft
Berlin