

# Whom to Remember – How to Return? Brigitte Schiffer, the Voices of Siwa and the Entangled History of the Berlin School of Ethnomusicology

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**Abstract** For some years now, there has been an intense and controversial debate about the relationship between the culture of memory and research into the consequences of colonialism, on the one hand, and the Holocaust, on the other. Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory and Nathan Sznajder's contribution to the debate on the vanishing points of memory ("Fluchtpunkte der Erinnerung") provide only a few of several examples. Using the recordings of the German-Jewish composer and ethnomusicologist Brigitte Schiffer, made at the oasis of Siwa in the Sahara in 1932/33, as a case study, the article reflects on the implications of this debate for dealing with the so-called Berlin School of comparative musicology. Beyond that, the article asks how the complexity of competing memory discourses affects current approaches and efforts of decolonizing archives and identifies perspectives and strategies for how to handle such collections today, especially regarding the chances and challenges of so-called recirculation.

In 1933, the composer and ethnomusicologist Brigitte Schiffer conducted field research on the musical practices of the Amazigh communities living in the Siwa oasis in the western Sahara of Egypt for her PhD in comparative musicology. In the process, Schiffer made numerous phonograph recordings of speech, songs and other modes of communication using the voice, and instrumental music, using equipment belonging to the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv and guided by the methodology of her academic teachers, Erich Moritz von Hornbostel and Curt Sachs.<sup>1</sup> The year 1933, however, also became a turning point for Brigitte Schiffer in other respects: she came from a German-Jewish family and, just like her academic teachers Sachs and von Hornbostel, very soon faced increasing repression and persecution in Germany.

She fled from Berlin in 1935, settled in Cairo for the next 30 years, never lived permanently in Germany again, and died in London in 1986.

In the spring of 2023, ninety years after Brigitte Schiffer's field research at the oasis, an interdisciplinary "musical repatriation" (Gunderson et al. 2018) project was designed and funded by the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences with the aim of making her collection available in Siwa and exploring the prospects of developing collaborative work with local musicians. A team including an ethnomusicologist (Salwa El-Shawan Castelo-Branco), a music historian (the author), a linguist (Valentina Schiattarella) and a visual anthropologist (Antje Engelmann) visited the oasis, reached out to the musicians and local communities, held workshops about the digitized historical recordings, transcribed the texts, gathered detailed information about their content and discussed strategies about what to do with the collection in the future.<sup>2</sup>

This article deals with the complexity and multilayeredness of both the contexts of Schiffer's Siwa collection and the preparation for its 'return.' This is mostly because it became apparent during the intensive examination of the recordings and Schiffer's ethnomusicological research that one of the decisive questions in the further handling of this and many collections of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv is also central in this case. It concerns the controversial debate that has been going on in Germany (and elsewhere) for a number of years now about the relationship of so-called postcolonial studies to the (German) culture remembrance related to the Holocaust. Brigitte Schiffer, similar to her academic teachers who had been among the formative figures of the so-called Berlin School of ethnomusicology, did her research within an academic environment based on colonial structures. These structures were characterized by racist presuppositions and, in part, inhumane and degrading methods (see Kalibani in this volume). At the same time, Schiffer and most of her teachers belonged to a kind of "internally colonized minority"<sup>3</sup> (Sznajder 2022:31) in Germany because of their Jewish origin, which led to them becoming refugees and migrants. Their vision of ethnomusicology was disseminated around the world, but, for a long time, their work and biographies were mostly forgotten in Germany (Brüstle 2008:182–3). Against this background, the question arises today how to deal with this entangled history of German ethnomusicology before 1933, how to remember it, and how to deal with its legacy, texts, and archives, especial-

ly in the currently heated environment of concurrent victim narratives and identity debates. Using the example of Brigitte Schiffer's Siwa collection and research and the question of how to deal with it today, one can show where not only the conflict lines of these competing discourses of memory run, but also, to quote Natan Sznajder, identify possible "vanishing points of memory" (2022).

## **Eurocentric or transnational? German-Jewish or cosmopolitan? Composer, ethnologist, journalist, or pedagogue? How Brigitte Schiffer's multifaceted biography blurs the lines**

Before I focus on her work as an ethnomusicologist, I will provide a few insights into Schiffer's biographical background to give a better understanding of her perspective on her chosen field of research. Brigitte Schiffer was born in Berlin in 1909, the second child of the Jewish merchant Erwin Edwin Schiffer, who, probably coming from further east and hoping for social and economic advancement, had set off with his brother for the up-and-coming Prussian metropolis (for further details and source references on all biographical details about Schiffer, see Pasdzierny 2014; Pasdzierny & Schmidt 2017; Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017:577–82). The family settled in the newly built and modern Charlottenburg and endeavored to blend in as much as possible, which can be seen, for example, in the fact that Schiffer and her older brother were baptized as Evangelical Lutherans in 1911. This process of social integration in Germany ended, however, when Schiffer's father died in 1913 and her mother married, after a short time, Swiss-born businessman Kurt Oelsner. What followed was a phase of high mobility for the family (presumably also caused by World War I), which lived in various places in Switzerland until 1920 and for several years in Freiburg im Breisgau. In 1923, the Schiffer-Oelsners finally moved to Alexandria in Egypt, where Kurt Oelsner worked as a representative of a company for looms and other machines of the textile industry and Brigitte Schiffer completed her baccalaureate at the French school in 1929. When she decided to return to Berlin to study composition and ethnomusicology in 1930, she was not only a truly multilingual person (at the end of her life, Schiffer was fluent in German,

English, Italian, French, and Arabic) with experiences in different school systems, but had also spent her formative years as a teenager and young adult in the cities of Alexandria and Cairo, an environment simultaneously highly colonialist and cosmopolitan (Starr 2013). A constant in all her rather turbulent childhood and teenager years seems to have been her preoccupation with music; she states in her rare autobiographical documents (such as the short CV in her dissertation) that she had music lessons in all the places mentioned above, in some cases with quite renowned teachers, for example, Henri Stierlin-Vallon, who was her piano teacher in Alexandria (Schiffer 1936:94).

However privileged one wants to perceive Schiffer and her work in the early 1930s from a postcolonial point of view, her position changed drastically at the latest after the National Socialists were elected to governmental power in Germany in the spring of 1933. The entire time of writing her doctoral thesis about Siwa already falls into this period. The fact that her living and studying conditions changed fundamentally in National Socialist Germany became initially most apparent in the context of her composition studies at the Hochschule für Musik, where students of the Nazi Student League threatened to disrupt a public concert evening with premieres of her works in the summer of 1934, so that, in the end, it could only be performed internally (Pasdzierny 2018:23–4). But Schiffer's ethnomusicology studies at Berlin University and with it, her doctoral project were also increasingly put into danger. She was only able to avert her exmatriculation in 1934 and, finally, successfully defended her dissertation in 1935 with the help of Arnold Schering, the dean of the faculty at Berlin University. Nevertheless, she had to withdraw the planned dedication of the 1936 printed version of her dissertation (*Die Oase Siwa und ihre Musik*) to her doctoral advisor von Hornbostel, who had already left Berlin in 1933 and died in exile in England in 1935 (Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017:96). Even the mere mention of his name in such a context was undesirable within German ethnomusicology at that time. Schiffer bowed to this dictate; for her, it was important to leave Germany with a degree in order to have better prospects for her future career. This was going to pay off decades later when she applied for compensation as part of West Germany's efforts for "Wiedergutmachung" to the victims of the Holocaust, where the very question of her degree could determine the amount of payments made (Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017:192). For Schif-



fer herself, the publication of her dissertation also became a kind of farewell to Germany: she had fled Berlin, together with her partner Hans Hickmann, more or less immediately after the defense of her dissertation in June 1935 and moved back to Egypt permanently, where she lived for approximately 30 years.



**Figure 1.** Brigitte Schiffer, ca. 1932/33, photographer: unknown.

Nevertheless, after the end of the Second World War, Schiffer immediately started to travel to Europe again, where she very soon became a renowned and highly valued part of the international 'jet set' of avantgarde art music composition, which led, inter alia, to her being the first woman ever to give a lecture at the International Summer Courses for New Music in Darmstadt in 1950. When she decided to leave Cairo in the early 1960s, increasingly restricted in her options by Arabization and political narrowing in Egypt, the first possible places to choose from were Berlin, Zurich, and London. In Berlin, for example, she was offered a position at the then newly founded Institute for Comparative Music Studies (Ziegler 2017:72–3). In the end, however, she decided to move to London, where she was active as a journalist with a focus on contemporary music until her death in 1986.

Looking at her biography, Brigitte Schiffer can be described as a very modern woman who led a life as a self-determined, cosmopolitan, and cross-border personality, despite all the political and gender-related constraints and limitations of her time. It is notable that Schiffer already dealt with very different topics during her studies in Berlin. In her composition studies with Heinz Tiessen, she was interested in tracing the aesthetic innovations of the Central European avant-garde, for example, in the compositions of Paul Hindemith. At that time, Berlin was considered one of the most important centers of these renewal movements; this may well have been one of the reasons for her to apply to study there. At the same time, together with her later partner and husband for a couple of years, Hans Hickmann, she was involved in the early music movement, which was expanding rapidly at the time. Exemplarily, she played the recorder and perhaps also the clavichord in Eta Harich-Schneider's Collegium für Alte Musik. Very probably, she exchanged ideas on this topic with Curt Sachs, who, at the time, was in charge of the Musical Instrument Museum housed at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik and made the collection accessible for practical use (Schenk 2004:244–6). Finally, following the impulse of her doctoral advisor Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, she became interested in non-European musical cultures. All in all, Schiffer's preoccupation with this wide range of topics always added up. For example, her compositions took inspiration from both her ethnomusicological research and her exploration of Baroque (see below and Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017:95).

Even at this early stage, she seemed to be fascinated by bringing music from very different times and cultures into contact with one another and, thus, expanded her own knowledge and understanding of it. This was to become an almost paradigmatic program of hers, especially during her later professional career in Cairo as a pedagogue and director of the Higher Institute of Music Education for Women, where it was her main intention to bring contemporary European and Arab music into exchange.<sup>4</sup> As an ethnomusicologist in the 1930s, Schiffer operated from a privileged, 'white' position, especially since, as will become clear in the following, the methods she employed and the infrastructure she used were deeply influenced by colonialist thinking. But at the same time, a description of her life and work defies simple categories and attributions, such as privileged, marginalized, 'white' or 'colonized.' Instead, it is the networking, the exchange with vastly different cultures and scenes, and the forging of connections that forms the ethical core of her work and thinking. Schiffer's biography shows a great deal of hybridity, mobility, and openness to different environments including non-European cultures. In the course of her life, it became a matter of the heart for her to make encounters between these different spheres possible, and to act as a kind of mediator and translator. This reflects in the fact that her memory is still held in high esteem in Cairo today; she has had a lasting influence on entire generations of music professionals there.<sup>5</sup>

## **Siwa as a keyhole to ancient Egypt? Brigitte Schiffer as part of German ethnomusicology in the 1930s**

Susanne Ziegler, in her article about Brigitte Schiffer's work as an ethnomusicologist, has already outlined the general historical context and genesis of Schiffer's Siwa collection, describing not only her relationship to the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, but also the confusing and partly messed up documentation of the recordings (Ziegler 2017:63–4).<sup>6</sup> In this contribution, I will focus on an analysis of Schiffer's dissertation and monograph *Die Oase Siwa und ihre Musik* (1936), which provides insight into the theoretical framework that undergirded her work as well as her central hypotheses and fieldwork methods, but also allows one to draw a number of conclusions about the general state of comparative musicology in Germany at the beginning of the Nazi era.

It is not known precisely how and why Schiffer decided to study the musical culture of the Siwa oasis. Presumably, several factors were decisive, beyond the generally growing interest of German-speaking ethnomusicology in the so-called Near East at this time (Ziegler 2017:59–60). Schiffer's biographical circumstances as described above would have to be mentioned (Alexandria, the city of her later teenage years, has often served as the starting point for trips to Siwa), also her contact with Moritz Erich von Hornbostel, who became the first supervisor of her dissertation. In addition to this, the influence of Curt Sachs, her teacher at the Hochschule für Musik, cannot be overestimated. Although he was not an expert on the music of this region, in her own words, she "owed [him] the inspiration for her dissertation" (Schiffer 1936:94). Last but not least, Robert Lachmann has to be mentioned; he was one of the most influential experts of Arabic music within German musicology at that time. Schiffer met him in Berlin (Ziegler 2017:59–60; Katz 2020).<sup>7</sup> She was probably one of the unofficial participants of the groundbreaking First International Congress of Arab Music in Cairo in 1932 (Katz 2015). Although not listed in the extensive conference report, a photo shows her together with Paul Hindemith and Béla Bartók at the pyramids of Giza during the time of the conference.<sup>8</sup> No doubt directly under the impressions of the congress, at which her academic teachers von Hornbostel and Sachs also played a central role, Schiffer decided to participate in an expedition to the oasis of Siwa in August 1932, which was led by Henry Maurer, the private dentist of King Fu'ad I and an active member of the Archaeological Society of Alexandria (Schiffer 1936:1).<sup>9</sup> One year after this more or less spontaneous and rather short research trip, Schiffer, together with her fiancé Hans Hickmann, returned to Siwa in the summer of 1933 for longer and more extensive field research, during which most of the relevant sound recordings of the collection and numerous photographs used in the dissertation were taken.

As mentioned, the context in which Schiffer did her research is the so-called Berlin school of comparative musicology (Bohlman 2001). Like its merits, the various problematic aspects of this academic environment have been described several times (Agnew 2005; Cairns 2020; Kalibani in this volume). Schiffer's research therefore has to be seen in a very ambivalent way. On the one hand, unlike many of her colleagues of the time, she had conducted field research and recordings herself, worked with then-modern technologies



such as the phonograph and the camera, and had not limited her studies in Siwa to music alone, but also described musical culture and practices within the overall sociocultural context of life in the oasis (Ziegler 2017:69–70). On the other hand, some of the basic assumptions of her study are directly related to the concepts of Berlin comparative musicology and, in a broader sense, anthropology at that time in general, which have been highlighted as particularly problematic because of their Eurocentricity, underlying racism, adherence to the idea of "salvage" ethnography and objectification of cultures (Bohlman 2001; for anthropology, Hilden 2022:207–8). In addition, a fundamental concept of comparative musicology of the time was to see the musical cultures of 'primitive peoples' as preliminary stages of the supposedly more highly developed and, thus, above all, more highly valued European musical culture. The study of such 'uncivilized' music, according to a thesis that seems almost grotesque from today's point of view, made it possible to look at earlier stages of European music as if in a time capsule. Anna Maria Busse Berger describes the evolutionist framework of comparative musicology once again and in great detail in her recently published study *The Search for Medieval Music in Africa and Germany, 1891–1961* (2020). Many of these problematic features of comparative musicology can also be found in Schiffer's Siwa research. The two central hypotheses underlying her dissertation are problematic from the outset. One concerns the supposed "purity" or authenticity of musical culture in Siwa, the other is related to the assumption that the musical life of the oasis could ultimately be traced back to remnants from ancient Egypt. At the same time, however, one must concede that Schiffer does not present these basic assumptions as strong theses, especially in comparison with the concrete results of her field research, but formulates them more in a subliminal and sometimes rather questioning manner.

Starting with the first assumption, Schiffer emphasizes the purity and genuineness of the musical culture in Siwa several times in her dissertation, placing great importance in the "authenticity of the material, which has been preserved [...] unchanged through the ages" (Schiffer 1936:19).<sup>10</sup> Although she repeatedly mentions Arab, Turkish and, then so-called "Hamitic" influences, she is, nevertheless, trying to play down the de facto highly hybrid state of Siwa's musical culture in favor of the ideal of purity: "the Siwi constantly takes in foreign melodies, but without mixing them with the au-

tochthonous ones" (Schiffer 1936:19).<sup>11</sup> It becomes clear in later parts of her work, on the other hand, that Schiffer was by no means unaware of the importance of hybridity and mixed forms for the musical culture in Siwa. An impressive example of this is her description of a long dance festival in which musical groups she identified as genuinely Siwi played simultaneously to a formation described as explicitly Bedouin, and the resulting mixtures and musical overlaps even constituted a special charm of the event (Schiffer 1936:32–36). Schiffer's own doubts about the postulated purity of musical culture in Siwa become most striking in the conclusion of her work:

Here as well as there, the oasis' own life is clearly evident. Whether it is a mixture of influences that met here and became something of their own under the formative pressure of oasis life (apart from the last Arab invasion, which is still ongoing), whether it is a stream that came from a certain direction and flooded over Siwa – as already finished before – we will always have to look at Siwan music in its own right. (Schiffer 1936:86–7).<sup>12</sup>

The reasons for Schiffer at least attempting to apply the aforementioned "purity model" to the culture in Siwa are relatively clear, and were related, more than anything else, to the thinking of her teacher von Hornbostel, who himself was influenced by Carl Stumpf (Busse Berger 2020:30, 37–8). Only a 'pure' and genuine musical culture could be compared at all with 'other' musical cultures, in the sense of the scientifically framed systematization of Berlin's comparative musicology of the time. Throughout her dissertation, Schiffer actually collates her findings with musical cultures from regions sometimes very far away, whereby the frame of comparison is mostly in the functionality of the music that she assumes is played, for example, for certain occasions or actions (e.g., funeral ceremonies, harvests).<sup>13</sup> But in contrast to this quasi-absolute comparability of non-European musical cultures that she and most of her musicology colleagues at that time assumed, Schiffer also describes how distant and removed musical culture in Siwa was from European ways of understanding music. She recognized, only for one of the melodies she recorded, that to her mind the "song was performed in a way that actually – one of the few cases – gave a direct human point of contact with European musical taste" (Schiffer 1936:38).<sup>14</sup>



Full audio file also is available as part of  
the web version of this publication

**Audio 1.** Wax Cylinder 38, "Beerdigungslied von Knaben".

Link to [audio file](#)

Interestingly, and at the same time not surprisingly, it was precisely this melody that Schiffer, as a composer, took up in the second movement of her string quartet "Sur un thème de l'oasis de Siwa." The string quartet was composed in 1933/34 and played for the first time during that same concert at the Berlin Hochschule für Musik which was threatened to be disturbed by Nazi students.<sup>15</sup>



Full audio file also is available as part of  
the web version of this publication

**Audio 2.** Brigitte Schiffer, String Quartet, second movement.

Link to [audio file](#)

Right down to the wording, Schiffer's academic teachers' influence becomes transparent in her highlighting of this very example in her dissertation. Curt Sachs, also for a piece of funeral music but from Latin-America, had described a very similar "human point of contact," albeit with even greater emphasis on the underlying Eurocentric superiority thinking:

Of course, the emotional content of foreign melodies never opens up to us. But there are cases in which natural folk melodies touch us in a very directly human way. One of these is the death song of Mexican Pueblo Indians. [...] it also grabs us. We shiver under the force of this primal pathos [...]. Here, in the last mystery of human life, we feel at one with the untamed brothers of the steppe (Sachs 1930:61–3).<sup>16</sup>

Moving on to the second hypothesis, the idea of direct connections to ancient Egypt in the culture of the Siwa oasis, it should be noted that it is less pronounced in Schiffer's work and, instead, articulated as a vague subtext.

This already becomes apparent in the introduction of the dissertation, where Schiffer states that the goal of her work was to draw a "firmly outlined musical character sketch of such an oasis, which even has an historical value" (Sachs 1930:20).<sup>17</sup> In focusing on traces of ancient Egypt to begin with, Schiffer was probably strongly influenced by the thinking of Hans Hickmann, her fiancé and companion during the field research. In the following years, Hickmann presented numerous publications on the music of ancient Egypt and repeatedly made comparisons with various rural music cultures in contemporary Egypt (Hickmann 1958). The similarities to Schiffer's work become clearest when she describes the so-called "ethnological findings" of the oasis, i.e., gives a general description of the way of life of the local population. Schiffer draws analogies between specific agricultural tools or even the hairstyle worn by the women in Siwa, which, in her eyes, is reminiscent of images from ancient Egypt (Schiffer 1936:80–1). Regarding music in Siwa, her statements are more vague in this respect; she speaks in several places of the cultic significance of music and specific instruments in Siwa, which, in her appraisal, "perhaps" could also be "a relic of antic Egyptian traditions" (Schiffer 1936:14).<sup>18</sup>

All in all, Schiffer's dissertation is very much a product of its time, i.e., it follows the methodological imprints and presuppositions of the Berlin school of comparative musicology to a great extent, even if her text remains largely free of obvious racism and stereotypes and even if she herself, partly at least, questions her own basic assumptions of, for example, the "purity" of musical culture in Siwa. However, one has to keep in mind that Schiffer was only 23 years old when she was beginning to work on her dissertation and, with a length of the continuous text of not even 90 pages, her contribution is comparable to a master's thesis of today (and was, in fact, the formal completion of her studies). Furthermore, as mentioned, the writing process and especially the completion of her dissertation falls into a time when the racist pressure on musicology as a subject, but also on Schiffer personally, was increasing greatly due to the National Socialists now being in power. Both supervisors of her thesis, von Hornbostel and Sachs, had to leave Berlin during this time, and Schiffer conducted her defense before a completely different committee than originally planned. It seems almost like a miracle, given the circumstances, that she, as a German-Jew, was able to graduate at this time at all. As has been mentioned, Schiffer fled Germany even before publishing

her dissertation and also turned her back on research in general for a long time (Ziegler 2017:72–3), even though she gave multiple lectures on Siwa at the beginning of her time in Cairo, presumably mainly for financial reasons (Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017:91). A very belated after-effect of her research activities in Egypt itself, which is now becoming helpful for the "re-circulation" project mentioned at the outset, is the Arabic translation of her dissertation published in Cairo in 2000. Translated by the Egyptian German-trained composer Gamal Abd Al-Rahim, edited and with an introduction to Schiffer herself and to the methods and questions of ethnomusicology by Samha Al-Khuli, a musicologist and one of Schiffer's former students, this publication shows the high esteem in which her work and person are held in Egypt to this day (Ziegler 2017:74).<sup>19</sup>

### **To return what was always there? Some preliminary thoughts about the "musical repatriation" of Brigitte Schiffer's Siwa recordings**

An exploration of Schiffer's field research methods lead directly to the question of how to deal with her Siwa sound recordings today. Here, too, her dissertation allows some insights. Schiffer reports there, for example, how, due to a lack of language skills (concerning the local Berber dialect Siwi), she had to rely on the help and translation of the local population to be able to reproduce the texts of the chants she recorded (Schiffer 1936:48). She also mentions that the recording situation was often perceived as strange by the musicians, since it was detached from the actual activity involved or sung about (such as the preparation and consumption of palm wine or harvesting dates) (Schiffer 1936:20, 46). In addition, she mentions recording problems and distortions that sometimes occurred – for instance, some of the repertoire typical of Siwa was performed at a very high volume due to its original function as a means of communication over great distances (Schiffer 1936:16).



Full audio file also is available as part of  
the web version of this publication

**Audio 3.** Wax cylinder 28 "Fragment eines Arbeitsliedes (Dattelernte)".

Link to [audio file](#)

Finally, Schiffer notes that, in some cases such as the preparations for the dance festival mentioned previously, she was simply denied further information: "Getting people to talk about the preparations [for the dance festival] and the like was just impossible" (Schiffer 1936:33).<sup>20</sup>

It is striking from today's perspective that the people behind the voices she recorded remain mostly nameless and invisible in Schiffer's research, but that was common in ethnographic research at the time. Although the documentation of her recordings includes names for some of the singers and speakers, the information is incomplete and does not allow for a reconstruction of the people involved in the sessions.<sup>21</sup> The same applies to the various photographs taken by her and Hans Hickmann and published in her dissertation. They are more illustrative in character and provide no information about who exactly can be seen in them. The only person from Siwa mentioned by name in the dissertation is Schiffer's host during her second stay, referred to as a "Sheikh Meshri" (Schiffer 1936:77). Here, the "absent presence in the colonial archive," as Hilden calls it (2022:19), comes into full effect, turning the recorded people and their voices into bare objects of scientific exploration.

This is where the repatriation, or rather recirculation project mentioned at the beginning of this article comes in. First of all, the term "repatriation" is problematic from various points of view. Not only the term but also the underlying ethical program have been discussed intensively for quite some time in ethnomusicology and other disciplines (see the recent contributions in Gunderson et al. 2018; especially Seeger 2018; but also Vapnarsky 2020). Numerous questions arise in this context regarding the collections from Siwa, beginning with the addressees of such a "repatriation," or rather, to use Anthony Seeger's term, the "return of music to circulation" (2018:146). The community living in Siwa today has, more than ever, a strongly marginalized



position within the Egyptian state. The oasis itself is currently, on the one hand, increasingly open for exploitation by (Egyptian) mass tourism. On the other hand, the local population has suffered from incremental restrictions including limited freedom of movement enforced by military and secret police (for a current bibliographical overview of the research on Siwa, see Serreli & Schiattarella 2021). The recirculation project, therefore, opted for an informal return of the recordings through direct communication and workshops with local musicians, people in the cultural sector, and educational institutions such as libraries. At the same time, it sought to collaborate with an Egyptian state institution into whose collections the digitized holdings can be officially "repatriated."<sup>22</sup> Some remarkable results came to light in the process, especially in conversation with local musicians.<sup>23</sup> One of these findings, for example, is that many of the recordings Schiffer made contain songs in Arabic and by no means, as she stated in her dissertation, in Siwi. Also, hybrid texts, i.e., texts in Siwi with interpolated single Arabic expressions, are the rule rather than the exception in the collection. Whether or not Schiffer deliberately presented her materials differently to strengthen her hypotheses remains unclear. Together with local musicians, we also found out that although some of the songs and instruments have now fallen into disuse in Siwa, a large part of the repertoire continues to be alive and, in some cases, remains almost unchanged. This led to a particularly illuminating and irritating moment for me when during a conversation, the notions of "repatriation" and "return to circulation" all of a sudden were exposed as a Eurocentric idea designed to calm European bad conscience: "What do you want to bring us back," someone said, "the music was never gone, we play it every night."<sup>24</sup> Since music is practiced and transmitted in Siwa to this day as an exclusively oral culture, there is no need for any kind of recording system there, which means that interest in phonographic recordings is low.<sup>25</sup>

The symbolic act of repatriation or recirculation itself, at least in the case of immaterial heritage, does indeed often seem to be meaningful primarily for those actors from the Global North who would like to see themselves giving back and seek for a sort of redemption from moral guilt. More importantly, as Seeger and Vapnarsky both describe, such projects should opt for setting in motion complex, but also extensive social practices, encounters, and communication (Seeger 2018:157; Vapnarsky 2020:387). Thus, an important outcome of the Siwa fieldwork of 2023 was, for example, that a local

expert on local musical culture thoroughly reviewed the Arabic translation of Brigitte Schiffer's dissertation and added comments. Moreover, as mentioned, transcriptions and commentaries were made for many of the historical recordings in joint workshops on-site. First loose plans were made to invite some of the musicians from Siwa to Berlin for performances or a round-table. Whether and how these plans will materialize, the future will show.<sup>26</sup> In any case, Brigitte Schiffer's collection from 90 years ago has now initiated a renewed intensive exchange between Siwa, Berlin, and the ethnomusicological research community.

## Conclusion

Looking at the history of Schiffer's ethnomusicological work and musing about its ethical implications for current-day research, it becomes clear that, in some ways, different lines of a culture of remembrance (*Erinnerungskultur*) come into conflict here. One could also look at it as competing victim narratives. On the one hand, the recently intensified effort to decolonize both archives and disciplines seeks to allow the forgotten, repressed, and abused subjects of ethnological and anthropological research of the European colonial period to speak. The methods, questions and, above all, the structures of this period have had an impact far into the 20th century, if not into the present (Hilden 2022:19–20). And, no doubt, Schiffer's research emerged from precisely this context. On the other hand, as a German-Jewish woman in the 20th century, Brigitte Schiffer herself belonged to a group of intersectionally marginalized and disadvantaged people whose health and even lives were eventually threatened. This precarity was the reason that Schiffer's life and work as a composer, ethnomusicologist, journalist, networker was almost completely forgotten for a long time. Not only Schiffer, but the vast majority of the key figures of the so-called Berlin School of comparative musicology, including von Hornbostel, Sachs and Lachmann, and younger scholars, such as Hans Helfritz (see Lambert in this volume), also faced persecution by the Nazi regime. This led to an immense brain drain for ethnomusicology in Berlin as a whole, also after 1945, and the discipline would not recover for a long time. It therefore seems like an almost paradoxical twist in the history of German academia that those same actors who led the deeply racist and colonially influenced discipline of compara-

tive musicology to success in Germany and beyond ended up being the victims of a racist cultural policy themselves. For all the necessary critique of German-language comparative musicology's evolutionist framework in the 1920s/30s, this is something to keep in mind.

What follows from this entangled history of the Berlin school of ethnomusicology? First of all, it goes to show that dichotomies are not helpful in understanding the complex intertwinement of research ideologies and personal positionalities. Scholars can be openly racist and anti-Semitic, themselves be victims of persecution and, at the same time, follow racist intellectual agendas themselves. How do we deal with this? First of all, we probably must learn to cope with this complexity and contradictions, which seems to be increasingly difficult these days. Cultures of remembrance – like that of the Holocaust and that of colonial violence – do not exclude one another, and they do not compete with one another. This calls for heightened scholarly self-reflection: where, in our own texts, do the boundary lines between research and political activism run? It might be helpful to look for the intersections of cultures of remembrance, also in the context of multidirectional memory (Rothberg 2009; Kläver 2019:133–77; Sznajder 2022). Also, to open up debate, we might want to ask which cultures of remembrance ethnomusicology as a discipline would like to foster at the moment, and how do perspectives on these issues differ around the globe? In the context of the Near East conflict for example, this seems as urgent as it seems explosive. Discussing the role and methodology of the history of science could turn out particularly helpful here, especially with a view to the boundary lines between research and political activism (Stengel 2021 is very inspiring in this context).

In the context of the Berlin school of comparative musicology, it might be instructive to inquire into personal ideologies: What were the ideas of researchers with a view to questions of racism, the marginalization and objectification of people, but also to notions including purity and the authenticity of cultures or their hierarchical evaluation? Did their attitudes possibly change as a result of their own biographies, experiences of persecution and exile? For Brigitte Schiffer, this is difficult to answer because she no longer worked as a scholar after her emigration. What would certainly be an interesting undertaking, however, is to investigate whether and how, for example, the work of Curt Sachs and Robert Lachmann developed along their biographies (Brüstle 2008:181–82). When did specific research approaches and

concepts, such as the "purity" of cultures within ethnomusicology, give way to an explicit interest in hybridity and creolization of culture, and who were the agents of this change (Busser Berger 2020:68–73)? Such an approach seems to be a more productive way than glossing over the nested racisms of, for example, the early stages of ethnomusicology, or to make evident only individual aspects of it at a time without mentioning others. In this way, it would become possible to appreciate the productivity and, simultaneously, the problems of the Berlin School of comparative musicology, and to trace from it a path to our present.

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Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017, 54–75.

## Notes

1. <https://id.smb.museum/object/750262/schiffer-%C3%A4gypten>. Accessed 13 November 2023.
2. The results of this work have been presented in detail at an interdisciplinary panel during the ICTMD Congress 2023 (<http://ictmusic.org/ictm2023/programme>). Accessed 13 November 2023. A newly created and annotated documentation of the historical recordings will be published in the nearer future.
3. Original: "intern kolonialisierte Minderheit"; all translations from the original German in the following are by the author.
4. This can be seen in many of her letters from Cairo to colleagues and friends who remained in Germany and in some of her texts published in the 1940s to 1960s; see Pasdzierny, Schmidt, & Vogt 2017, *passim*, for her texts p. 686.
5. This was evident, *inter alia*, in the context of the book presentation of the Arabic translation of a selection of Schiffer's letters (Hili & Pasdzierny 2022) in Cairo in November 2022, when this appreciation of Schiffer was always expressed to the author not only in conversations with contemporary witnesses but also with representatives of the Faculty of Music Education at Helwan University in Cairo (the successor institute from Schiffer's active time there). Even today, a photo of Schiffer hangs in the institute building of Helwan University in Cairo-Zamalek. At this point, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Salwa El-Shawan Castelo Branco,

who enabled me to have numerous encounters during this time and from whom I myself always learn so much for my own research.

6. A revised and annotated documentation was presented at the mentioned interdisciplinary panel about the "repatriation" during the ICTMD Congress 2023 (see note 2).
7. Schiffer mentions her contact to Lachmann during her time in Berlin as a student in a letter to Gertrud Hindemith Cairo 21 September 1943, Hindemith Institut Frankfurt, Nr. 3.454.1-7.
8. Printed in the Arabic version of her dissertation, Schiffer 2000:51.
9. See also [http://asalex.org/henry\\_maurer.html](http://asalex.org/henry_maurer.html). Accessed 15 December 2023.
10. Original: "Echtheit des Materiales, das sich [...] durch Zeiten unverändert erhalten hat."
11. Original: "nimmt der Siwi ständig fremdes Melodiengut auf, ohne es aber mit dem bodenständigen zu vermischen"
12. Original: "[...] hier wie dort tritt das Eigenleben der Oase deutlich zu Tage. Handelt es sich nun um Mischungsprodukte von Strömungen, die sich hier trafen und unter dem formenden Druck des Oasenlebens zu etwas eigenem wurden (abgesehen von der letzten arabischen noch andauernden Invasion), handelt es sich um einen Strom, der von einer bestimmten Richtung herkam und über Siwa – als bereits fertiges – hinwegflutete – immer werden wir die siwanische Musik gesondert zu betrachten haben."
13. For example, pp. 4, 8, 9, 10 and 24.
14. Original: "Übrigens war das Lied in einer Art vorgetragen, die tatsächlich – einer der wenigen Fälle – direkt menschliche Berührungspunkte zum europäischen Musikgeschmack ergaben."
15. For an edition and CD recording of this work, as well as more information about its composition and performance history, see Pasdzierny & Schmidt 2022.
16. Original: "Der Gefühlsinhalt fremdländischer Melodien öffnet sich uns freilich nie. Aber es gibt Fälle, in denen uns Naturvolkmelodien ganz unmittelbar menschlich berühren. Zu ihnen gehört der Totengesang mexikanischer Pueblo-Indianer. [...] das packt auch uns. Wir erschauern unter der Gewalt dieses urtümlichen Pathos [...]. Hier, im letzten Mysterium des Menschenlebens, fühlen wir uns eins mit den ungebändigten Brüdern der Steppe."
17. Original: "fest umrissenes [...] sogar Anspruch auf historischen Wert erhebendes musikalisches Charakterbild einer solchen Oase."
18. Original: "Wie weit es sich bei diesen Instrumenten in Siwa nun um ein Relikt vielleicht altägyptischer Tradition handelt [...], bleibe dahingestellt."
19. A very big thank you again to Salwa El-Shawan Castelo Branco, who helped me to understand the newly added content and revisions of this translation.
20. Original: "die Leute über die Vorbereitungen [des Tanzfests] u. dgl. zum Reden zu bringen, war ein Ding der Unmöglichkeit."
21. See also Ziegler 2006:697–699.
22. Contact has already been made with the Higher Institute of Folk Arts which is part of the Academy of Arts in Cairo. Together with the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, an official return of the collection is to be prepared in the near future.
23. Beyond the preliminary outcome of the field research, which I only touched upon here, more on this project will be published in the near future (see footnote 2).
24. For various reasons, the names of the informants and local musicians in Siwa are not (yet) published here. This is, inter alia, because some musical practices in Siwa are currently perceived as problematic, either socially or for religious reasons (e.g., because they are associated with alcohol consumption).
25. Vapnarsky talks about similar cases (2020:385).

26. For the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Arab German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Cairo in November 2023 a group of Siwi musicians was invited by the author for a concert during an event of the working group Common Heritage Common Challenges, Unfortunately the whole event had to be canceled on short notice due to the political and security situation in the area after the events of 7 October 2023.

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