

Prolegomena to the Study of Historical Sound Recordings from Colonial Contexts

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Abstract With the invention of the phonograph in 1877, sound not only became a museum artifact in the European ethnological context, but this invention also offered new opportunities for scholars in their attempt to study the so-called "primitive cultures." In this attempt, European ethnologists claimed that the cultures of these so-called "primitive people" were meant to disappear because of their contact with Europe. Therefore, the main purpose of ethnological museums and sound archives in the early 20th century was to collect as many objects of culture as possible from all over the world, especially from non-European areas. In this logic, the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv worked together with, for example, ethnologists, linguists, musicologist and colonial officers to acquire as many non-European sound recordings as possible. German colonial officers and many other actors, who were not qualified for ethnomusicological fieldwork, took on the role of ethnologists, collecting objects, making a large number of sound recordings and producing/constructing knowledge on colonized people. This paper attempts to suggest background information to be considered today while dealing with this acoustic heritage issued from German colonial contexts. While suggesting the prolegomena to the study of historical sound recordings from colonial contexts and discussing the principles of the recording practice, the paper contextualizes these recordings as traces of a "colonial ear," which means a constructed acoustic representation of the "other."

Introduction

In 1900, the psychologist Carl Stumpf (1848–1936) became the first German to create a non-European phonographic collection in Germany by recording music and songs from a Siamese group performing in Berlin (Koch et al.

2004:227). This first collection served as the fundament for several other collections, which led to the foundation of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv (BPhA). The latter was officially founded as such in 1905 when Stumpf's assistant Erich Moritz von Hornbostel (1877–1935) became director of the archive (*ibid.*). Today, the BPhA is a department of the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and holds more than 16,000 original wax cylinder sound recordings, recorded between 1893 and 1954 from all over the world (Ziegler 1994:3). Music and songs especially from colonized people were recorded during German colonialism. The collecting practice involved different actors, such as ethnologists, colonial officers, medical doctors and missionaries.

This contribution aims at highlighting some background assessments one should consider when dealing with historical sound recordings held by the BPhA today. The conditions under which these recordings have been made, the mindset and motivation of the recorders while recording and studying music and songs from German colonies, and the purpose of the recordings in the past and the present are some aspects to be considered in the study of these recordings. The prolegomena consist of four theses which imply different aspects, such as the genesis of the BPhA and its recordings and contexts, the rhetoric of rescue in the framework of ethnographic collecting in the 18th and 19th centuries, the influence of racializing approaches in the act of recording and studying non-European music, the colonial opportunism of the so-called fathers of the Berlin School of Ethnomusicology, and the "colonial ear" of the recorders, scientists and listeners.¹

Historical sound recordings from colonial contexts

The BPhA was not the first sound archive in Europe. The Phonogramm-Archiv of the Austrian Academy of Sciences in Vienna (founded in 1899) was the world's first sound archive. Many other sound archives were also founded in the early 20th century in Paris, Budapest, and other European and US-American cities (Kunst 1974:21–2). After the invention of the phonograph in 1877, ethnologists and music ethnologists from the Global North soon began reflecting on the use of this new device in the study of music, which led to the creation of these institutions with the goal of recording, saving and

documenting thousands of wax cylinder recordings for the purpose of scientific study. These early sound recordings (mostly recorded between 1899 and the 1950s), stored in sound archives worldwide, are called historical sound recordings today. But what does "historical sound recordings from colonial contexts" mean?

The guidelines of the German Museums Association on the care of collections from colonial contexts associates the term "colonial contexts" with the

circumstances and processes that have their roots either in formal colonial rule or in colonial structures outside formal colonial rule. At such times, structures of great political power imbalance may have arisen both between and within states or other political entities. This created networks and practices that also supported the collection and procurement practices of European museums [...]. Colonial contexts, however, also led to the emergence of objects and depictions which reflected colonial thinking. Common to colonial contexts is an ideology of cultural superiority to colonized or ethnic minority populations [...] and the right to oppress and exploit. This also raises doubts about the legality of its use to justify acquiring collections. (German Museums Association 2021:26–7)

Cultural objects issued from colonial contexts are, according to this definition, based on unequal power relationships and/or a self-image of cultural superiority of those in power, which means, in this case, European collectors/recordists (German Museums Association 2021:23). Applying this definition to phonographic sound recordings, the term "colonial contexts" refers to phonographic sound recordings which have potentially been recorded within the framework of colonial practice and knowledge production and/or under asymmetric power relations. As this paper is based on the case of Germany, in the following, under the term of "historical sound recordings from colonial contexts," I explicitly consider sound recordings from German colonies, recorded in the formal German colonial period (1884–1914/16). It includes thousands of early recordings of, for example, voices, music, proverbs and songs made by different actors in German colonies.

Prolegomena to the study of historical sound recordings from German colonial contexts

1st Thesis: The practice of phonographic recording was influenced by evolutionary and racial theories and concepts

The phonograph was used worldwide, including in non-European areas, where people were considered as "primitive" according to the ideologies present in Europe and the US at that time. Evolutional assumptions and racial classifications influenced the practice of phonographic sound recording. The point on which I want to elaborate behind this assessment is the idea that all actors (e.g. ethnomusicologists, linguists, missionaries, colonial officers, geographers) recording in German colonies during German colonialism considered themselves to be superior to the colonized people they were recording. This may sound like a negative generalized judgment, but it seems correct if we closely analyze texts written by these recordists themselves about people whose voices and traditions they were recording, especially how the recordists generally justified their different motivations. One of the most redundant ideas in their bibliographies on sound recordings was the rhetoric of rescue, which is a consequence of evolutional assumptions from the 18th and 19th centuries in European countries (Koloß 1986). Phonographic collections from German colonial contexts have generally been recorded, documented and studied by the same scholars who studied and analyzed material cultural artifacts. Felix von Luschan (1854–1924), Otto Abraham (1872–1926) and Erich Moritz von Hornbostel, who is said to belong to the founding fathers of the Berlin School of Ethnomusicology (Christensens 2000:141), are three well-known names among a long list of scientists who dealt with both phonographic recordings and musical instruments or material cultural artefacts from German colonies. Their concern was not only the documentation of the recordings. They sometimes also analyzed and compared different cultural practices, including those from these so-called "primitive cultures," through their music and linguistic attributes, which were recorded and saved on wax cylinders by different actors such as ethnomusicologists, linguists, missionaries, colonial officers and geog-

raphers (Hornbostel 2000:94). Subsequently, the results of their analyses served to draw conclusions about the intellectual abilities of these people and classify them on different cultural and racial levels. Hornbostel himself hierarchized these different cultures, mentioning their music with different names: European folk music for Turkish and Romanian traditional music, music of advanced cultures for Japanese traditional music, and "exotic" and "primitive music" for traditional music from African cultures (Hornbostel 2000:94). However, the levels of abilities, civilization, and culture on which these ethnologists based their classifications were set by European ethnologists themselves based on evolutionary theories and concepts. The so-called "primitives" had never been asked if they saw themselves as belonging to an inferior race, culture or civilization. Even before the official foundation of the BPhA, Otto Abraham and Erich von Hornbostel argued that the so-called "exotic music" had the potential of inferring the cultural level of the people from whom they recorded – cultural level in terms of a classification from the lowest level to the highest level, which was meant to be "Western" civilization, as set up by evolutionary scientists. The distinction between "primitive people" and "cultural people" is of decisive importance in the evolutionist model of thought. Evolutionists postulated that cultures change from primitive to highly developed ones and are only civilized once they reach the state of European cultures (Koloß 1986:22-3). Abraham and Hornbostel wrote in 1904:

A sufficient collection of exotic music would not only allow us to infer the temperament of people. For as the cultivation of music is also functionally dependent on economic conditions like every artistic statement, the manner of making music, and in particular the spread and height of musical dilettantism, could also be used to infer people's cultural level. (Abraham & Hornbostel 1904:222-3)²

But the point is, how objective could such an inference of people's cultural level be in a scientific community where other cultures were not just seen as different but as inferior, where other cultures were considered as old forms of Western cultures, and where these scientists almost considered themselves heroes, whose concern was to rescue the material and musical artifacts of these so-called "primitives" but for the advantage of their own society? Indeed, the so-called fathers of the Berlin School of Ethnomusi-

cology claimed that the (musical) cultures of these so-called "primitives" were meant to disappear, and that it was their duty as a superior culture and race to collect all kinds of material culture they could gather, record all kinds of music and songs they could record, and study them in order to save them from "disappearance" (Aussterben). In the same logic, Carl Stumpf, the founder of the BPhA, called upon others to record as much as possible: "We must quickly collect all we can collect in exotic music. The extinction of the primitive people, as well as the cultural penetration of European culture, oblige us to hurry up" (Stumpf 1908:243–4).³

All this was not only the concern of scientists. The latter inspired other actors with whom they worked and commissioned to record in German colonies and other non-European geographical areas. Some of them, such as Otto Dempwolff (1871–1938), initially with a completely different profile, became linguistic specialists of ethnic groups in German colonies, studying these people and classifying them on different cultural and racial levels through phonographic recordings (Baumann et al. 2002:71).

While dealing with sound recordings from colonial contexts, we should consider this point of the influence of biased assumptions on the phonographic recording practice, especially when it comes to the authenticity of the contents of these recordings. Dempwolff, for instance, in his self-proclaimed position as a "white civilized scientist," described the people he recorded in German colonies in the Pacific as lazy people when it comes to thinking (denkfaule Naturkinder) (2019:33). Therefore, he recommended Christianization as a key to teach them European culture, which was meant to be the best and real one:

It may be doubtful whether the capabilities of the race and the conditions of the climate will ever permit the colored people to equal the whites in achievements. But to develop them to what they are capable of, to make them as accessible as possible to our culture, there is no better method than to bring them Christianity. (Dempwolff 1914:13)⁴

The fact that the recordists/collectors in German colonies had a preset way of thinking about the people they were recording (in a superior-inferior relationship) is an important aspect one should know and consider before using these early sound recordings for any purpose today.

2nd Thesis: Exploitation of the "other" was one of the motivations of the recordists/collectors

Rescuing musical traditions of the so-called "primitives" was not always the single motivation of the actors who practiced phonographic recording in German colonies. Seen within the logic of colonial knowledge production, phonographic recording practice (from German colonies) at its beginnings also aimed at educating the German public about the colonized people and at convincing the former of the "importance" of having colonies. Therefore, ethnological museums were the right place where, in an entertaining way, representations could be spread to the German public. However, not only material culture could be visited in ethnological museums in the early 20th century. Phonographic recordings were sometimes offered at certain visiting times booked by the visitors, as Carl Stumpf stated in 1908:

However, such a collection [of phonographic recordings] should not only serve research [...] but also demonstration and instruction for the visitors of the museums. In some museums, for example, in the young Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne, phonographic demonstrations are offered for a certain time of visit. (Stumpf 1908:228)⁵

In a similar rhetoric, Felix von Luschan considered that it was the right of visitors to know what the language and music sounded like of people whose objects they could see in the museums (1904b:202). This means that, in this logic of spreading representations, material cultural objects and immaterial culture (sound, songs, music) interacted in museums as educational institutions. To consider the term used by Carl Stumpf, phonographic recordings aimed at playing the role of "demonstration and instruction" for the German public. One of the long-term results of this action consisted of maintaining power over colonized people, for instance when we consider this intention. While studying the so-called "primitive cultures," Felix von Luschan was

also guided by the famous aphorism "knowledge is power," as he stressed in his book *Anleitung für ethnographische Beobachtungen* (1904a:6). Indeed, the production of discourses and knowledge about colonized people allowed, or was meant to allow, the colonizers to know and exploit these people better. Alluding to his own colonial aspirations, Carl Stumpf attempted to legitimate German colonialism by quoting it as a valuable argument for the phonographic recording practice:

The new empire prides itself on the colonies and seeks to exploit them materially to the best of its ability. But it is obligatory to combine material exploitation with scientific one. [...] [W]herever in a scientific work the culture of the natives is to be described completely and scientifically exactly, phonographic recordings cannot be missing. [...] So, our colonial aspirations, understood in a higher sense, must necessarily have such an institution. (Stumpf 1908:244–5)⁶

This leads to the conclusion that the scientists acted as opportunists while dealing with the recordings. They did not only collect and study as a fact of rescue, as they argued in the very early days of the phonograph. They also did not just use this practice to claim their self-declared cultural and civilizational superiority at that time. Eventually, they used the recordings to legitimate colonialism by highlighting the impact of their works on colonial knowledge production and, consequently, colonial exploitation (Stumpf 1908).

This aspect should be considered today when dealing with sound recordings from German colonies and their documentation. Especially the studies on "primitive cultures" published by the ethnomusicologists at that time should not be considered as the result of harmless scientific research but as documents potentially influenced by colonial-ideological ideas and guided by aspirations to power.

3rd Thesis: Colonialism allowed the rise of phonographic collections of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv

Regarding material artifacts in German ethnological museums, the intensification of phonographic collections in the BPhA between 1900 and 1914 can be attributed to German colonialism. It is a matter of fact. Without colonialism, there would not have been so many of such collections from non-European areas in the BPhA today. The inventories of the archive show that the formal colonial era is the golden age of the archive in terms of collections and a huge part of these collections was recorded in German colonies at that time (Ziegler 2006:23). But to what extent did colonialism influence the phonographic recording practices in German colonies?

Colonial rule did not really allow colonized people to protest against decisions taken by colonial officers. Considering the arbitrary legal situation in the colony, one could say that colonized people in German colonies were directly or indirectly forced to participate in the life of the colony and, therefore, also in the recording activities. Even if the recordists and scientists rarely clearly mentioned the direct situation in which they recorded and the challenges they faced while recording in their studies on colonized people, the potentially violent recording situation should not be underestimated. As an illustration, I would like to consider a travel report by the German geographer Karl Weule (1864–1926), which he published in 1908 under the title *Negerleben in Ostafrika. Ergebnisse einer ethnologischen Forschungsreise* ("Negro Life in East Africa. Results of an Ethnological Research Trip"). Weule described in a chapter of this book how violent he became when a blind singer could not sing the way he (Weule) was expecting him to sing:

With rapid impulsiveness [...] I now grab the blind singer by the neck as soon as he gets his lion's voice sound. Then I hold the woolly head in a vice-like grip until the bard has finished roaring his heroic song. I did not care whether he flutters and tugs and still tries to turn his head so energetically – I just continue holding it. (Weule 1908:215–6)⁷

Colonial rule provided better working conditions for recordists, which helped them directly or indirectly to force colonized people to sing or speak for their recording purposes. And in cases of complaint, violence was sometimes used. Logically, the colonial era was the greatest one for the BPhA, and the frequency of the recordings reduced drastically after 1914 when Ger-

many lost its colonies after World War I. German colonialism was a kind of catalyst for the recording practice in the case of the BPhA.

In this respect, it is important to consider that aspect of catalyzation by colonialism today when analyzing the history of the BPhA and its collections. Regarding the interactions between ethnologists and colonial officers and the fact that these interactions occurred in the golden age of the archive in terms of extending its sound recording collections, one can sum up that the archive was not just a scientific institution which arose from nothing, but that colonialism was a convenient occasion for the extension of its collections of non-European sound items. The recording practice also occurred under violent situations: a cultural violence with the aim of acquiring and appropriating the culture of the "other" for one's own purposes and the, possible, physical violence practiced on colonized people during the recording act.

4th Thesis: The documentation of sound recordings from the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv is full of mistakes and errors

What about the content of the recordings themselves? Considering the recording situation, it is obvious that the recordings are not authentic sources of musical cultures and traditions from the past, as I have stated previously. They were not made in authentic situations. Nevertheless, the linguists, ethnologists, missionaries and even colonial officers attempted to study these people using these recordings. They rarely questioned their authenticity. The recordists did not only record songs and music in colonies, but they also collected other objects and information about those people recorded. Before going to the colonies, not only the phonograph but also a so-called journal was given to them, in which they had to fill in information, for example, regarding the culture from which they recorded, the meaning of the content of the recording, the names and ages of the people recorded, the transcription of the text and its translation into German (Luschan 1904a:61-2). This documentation partially served as a basis for the study of the content once the recording came to Germany. The original documen-

tation of most of the recordings is still available today in the BPhA. But it is obvious that the information collected in such situations contains errors, mistakes and inconsistencies. The recordists often could not speak the local languages and even when they were helped by translators, the latter were not always qualified for the languages they had to translate, which led to huge communication problems in some cases. It is also obvious that colonized people did not always want to reveal all aspects of their cultures and musical traditions to colonizers. As an example I would like to introduce a recording made by the German colonial officer Julius Smend (1873–1939) in the German colony of Togo in 1905. The song recorded was registered in the inventories of the archive as *Smend Togo I, Walze 36* (SMB/EM/BPhA, VII W 5322). It was recorded in Kara, a northern city of Togo on 15 January 1905. The audible content consists of a song apparently sung by several female voices. Smend noticed in his report that this song in its function was sung by people working on the farm. However, my research on this recording, where I also interviewed people from this culture, led to a unambiguous conclusion: This cannot be a kind of song which people sang while working on the farm. The lyrics in the original language were also completely different from Smend's own transcription of the sung text. It was, instead, a song sung during a socialization ceremony, where young ladies are trained and prepared to become wives.

Regarding the question why such a (probable) mistake could occur, there are many hypotheses: it is possibly due to the language/communication challenges or the incompetence of the translator to translate that language (Kabyè), as has been mentioned previously. It could also have been caused by colonial power relations. It is possible that colonized people whose voices were recorded did not want to tell Julius Smend the real meaning of the song as a criticism of the colonial rule.

Given this, it is important when studying these sound recordings today, not only to refer to the documentation from the BPhA but to work, whenever possible, with people from the source communities in order to verify any available information or gain different perspectives to those some researcher gleaned in the past (Furniss 2017; Lewy 2018; Kalibani 2019),

and, even better, to look for collaborative research projects with other researchers from former German colonies.

End remarks: the "colonial ear"

Considering the aspects highlighted in this paper, I coined the concept of the "colonial ear" as a term which describes the a priori reasoning under which sound recordings from colonial contexts have been made. One should consider the colonial ear for any objective work on historical sound recordings from colonial contexts. It refers to the recordist's perception of those people recorded. The majority of colonial officers and other recordists in the colonies were not only acting in their position as power holders (colonizers), but also perceived colonized people as racially and culturally inferior to them while recording and documenting the native's musical traditions. This also applies to the public in Germany, especially to those who listened to these songs after they had been sent to German museums. The public heard the voices of colonized people with a colonial ear, with preset ways of thinking. Listening to the sound in the museums, therefore, aimed at confirming the clichés about the (already widespread) construction of colonized people as "wild" or "primitive," as conveyed by scientists of that time. Finally, the colonial ear refers to the scientists themselves, especially ethnomusicologists. The colonial ear means, in that case, the acoustic construction of colonized people. While studying the latter, the scientists also already had a preset mental and biased opinion about the colonized, which made them consider themselves to be superior in almost every aspect. They listened to so-called "exotic music" with a colonial ear and constructed knowledge about their culture. Today, taking into consideration the colonial ear of these scientists, recordists and the museums' public of that time is an important part of the prolegomena to the study of each sound recording from colonial contexts.

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Notes

1. Many of these starting points have been discussed at different levels and in other ways by previous works (see for instance: García 2017, Hoffmann & Mnyaka 2014, Kalibani 2019, Sterne 2003, Stoler 2009). This paper concerns the specific case of the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv.
2. "Ein hinreichendes Material an exotischer Musik würde uns aber nicht nur einen Rückschluss auf das Temperament eines Volkes gestatten; denn da die Musikpflege wie jede künstlerische Äußerung, auch zu den wirtschaftlichen Verhältnissen in funktionaler Abhängigkeit steht, könnte aus der Art des Musizierens sowie namentlich aus der Ausbreitung und Höhe des musikalischen Dilettantismus auch auf die Kulturstufe eines Volkes geschlossen werden."
3. "Was an exotischer Musik noch zu sammeln ist, muss schleunigst gesammelt werden. Das Aussterben der Naturvölker ebenso wie das Eindringen europäischer Kultur zwingen zur Eile."
4. "Es kann zweifelhaft sein, ob die Fähigkeiten der Rasse und die Bedingungen des Klimas es je zulassen werden, dass die Farbigen an Leistungen den Weißen gleichkommen. Um sie aber zu dem zu entwickeln, was sie überhaupt leisten können, um sie soweit als möglich unserer Kultur zugänglich zu machen, dazu gibt es keine bessere Methode, als ihnen Christentum zu bringen."
5. "Eine solche [phonographische] Sammlung soll aber nicht bloß zur Forschung dienen [...] sondern auch zur Demonstration und zur Belehrung für die Besucher der Museen. In manchen Museen, z.B. in dem jungen Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cöln sind denn auch bereits für bestimmte Besuchstunden phonographische Vorführungen angeordnet."
6. "Das neue Reich rühmt sich der Kolonien und sucht sie nach Kräften materiell auszubeuten. Es ist aber Pflicht, die wissenschaftliche Ausbeutung [...] damit zu verbinden. [...] wo immer in einem gelehrten Werke die Kultur der Eingeborenen vollständig und wissenschaftlich exakt beschrieben werden soll, da können phonographische Aufnahmen nicht fehlen. [...] Also haben auch unsere kolonialen Bestrebungen, in höherem Sinn aufgefasst, eine solche Einrichtung zur notwendigen Folge."
7. "Mit der raschen Impulsivität [...] fasse ich neuerdings den blinden Sänger einfach am Kragen, sobald er seine Löwenstimme erschallen lässt. Dann halte ich das wollige Haupt wie in einem Schraubstock fest, bis der Barde sein Heldenlied zu Ende gebrüllt hat. Ob er zuckt und zerrt und den Kopf noch so energisch zu wenden versucht – ich halte ihn." (See also Kirchmair's contribution in this issue.)

About the author

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