



The Emperor's New Colonies

By Wilhelm R. Schmidt



The Colonial Picture Archive in Frankfurt offers a unique pictorial record of German colonial history. For many years the collection was virtually forgotten. However, following painstaking description and digitalisation, the photo documents are now available on the Internet to researchers in Germany and abroad



In 1990, when two doctoral students from Frankfurt, Imre Demhard und Uwe U. Jäschke, were searching for historical material about the former German South-West Africa, they uncovered a treasure trove: the well-nigh forgotten image archive of the Reich Colonial Society, which was dissolved during the Second World War. This collection of 55,000 historical photos is a first-class, multi-faceted source for colonial history. Following the description, backup filming and digitalisation of the image documents, which was as costly as it was time consuming, the Colonial Picture Archive is now accessible on the website of the Johann Christian Senckenberg University Library in Frankfurt am Main to scientists and other interested parties from around the world.

The original owner of the image material, which also includes training material and roughly 6 18,000 books on colonial history,

Portrait of an African family. The photo was probably taken in 1906 in German South West Africa, now Namibia. Settlers, colonial officers and missionaries photographed the indigenous population as well as towns and landscapes in the "German South West." The colony was part of the German Empire from 1884 to 1919.

was the former German Colonial Society, whose inventory was moved from Berlin during the Second World War, initially to an underground shelter in Thuringia and later to the Frankfurt area. They eventually arrived, via the collecting points set up by the American occupation administration in the Rhine-Main district, at the City and University Library of Frankfurt am Main in the new state of Hesse.

However, the beginnings of the collection of colonial images reach back to before the foundation of the German Colonial So-

ciety. In the mid-19th century, researchers and missionaries began photographing the inhabitants and the natural environment of their areas of operation using large-format plate cameras. The German Colonial Society came into existence in 1887. With its domestic and foreign departments, it represented the largest and most influential interest group for the propagation of the idea of German colonialism.

The most important means of publicity available to them was the public lecture. In the 1880s, lectures were already being illustrated using the guest speaker's private glass plate slides. This prompted the society to lay the basis for its own photo collection in 1891, initially with about 100 large-format black and white slides to be used for slide shows. The pool of photos grew rapidly thanks to donations from friends of the Society and to the acquisition of other original and duplicate



images from governmental, commercial and private collections that have mostly been lost today. After the First World War, existing collections were systematically reproduced and incorporated in the inventory of the German Colonial Society. In 1936, as part of national socialist "Gleichschaltung" (forcible coordination), the organisation was merged with the Reich Colonial Society, which was then dissolved in 1943 for reasons of the wartime economy.

The image material of the German Colonial Society forms the basis of today's Frankfurt collection, which also features fairly extensive image documentation of colonial history in, for example, South America. According to a first inspection and diagnosis in 1990, the original image carriers were in critical condition. The dusty glass plates exhibited a considerable amount of scratching and sticking, fracturing

and bleaching, salt efflorescence and delamination. Working with nitro film material can be laborious and, due to its high flammability, dangerous. It was foreseeable that deterioration of the collection of images relating to German colonial history would be complete within a few years, if conservation measures were not taken.

The image documents that are now available, following protracted preparatory work, on the website of the Frankfurt University Library refer to almost all of the historical colonial areas. Alongside the African dependencies

(Togo, Cameroon, German South West Africa and German East Africa), the Chinese concession Kiaochow, Kaiser-Wilhelmsland (German New Guinea) and the South Sea areas are also represented. There are also many thousand images of the colonies of other states in Africa and Asia.

During the conservation work, an increasing level of awareness of the Frankfurt archive among domestic and foreign cooperation projects led to an exchange of image material and to offers to provide more images to the archive. By far the greatest gain was achieved, with the support of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (German Research Foundation), through a cooperation with the Sam Cohen Library in the Namibian coastal town of Swakopmund. The Society for Scientific Development located there provided a substantial image collection for the expansion of the Colonial Picture Archive. It includes 5,000 slides and glass plates

as well as a further 10,000 images and postcards in lever arch files or historical photo albums. Along with landscapes and city views, missionary stations, streets, harbours and farms, there are pictures of everyday life, festivals and sport events and many portraits. It was quickly established that there was practically no overlapping with the existing Frankfurt material, so their incorporation in the archive represented a real scientific gain.

Based on the experiences acquired through the filming and digitalisation of the Colonial Picture Archive, it seemed an obvious step to make the German Colonial Encyclopaedia available on the Internet in digital form, and to offer it in conjunction with the image database. The German Colonial Encyclopaedia, which was edited by Heinrich Schnee, the former Director of the Reich Colonial Office, is a contemporary reference work of the German colonies. By the time the First World War broke out, most of it had been published in printed form. The digital publication of the encyclopaedia, accomplished by the University of Applied Sciences in Dresden, means that access to this unique historical and scientific source is no longer restricted to specialist institutions, and that it can now be utilised around the globe. The encyclopaedia shows the conditions in the colonies as reflected by contemporary views before 1914. It thereby provides an important information basis for research.

Today, extensions to the image material in the colonial image archive in Frankfurt do not always pursue scientific goals or result from deliberate acquisitions. Chance and everyday caprices often have a roll to play. In the autumn of 2005, for example, the Frankfurt Library was offered a photo collection that had lain for over sixty years in a cellar in Siegburg. It consisted of 150 photographs and postcards, which were brought from what was then German South West Africa in 1913. The photographs show the everyday life of a telegraph line worker,





Scenes from everyday life in the colonies. Left: A lesson under the open skies. Top right: In German East Africa (Tanzania), a team of oxen draws a heavily-loaden wagon through the water. Bottom left: Natives at a homestead in Togo. Bottom right: On 27 January 1912, German colonists unveil an equestrian statue in Windhoek (German South West).



who worked in the postal service in the German colony from 1905 to 1913. The amateur photographs not only illustrate the working life of the time, but also give fresh views of places, rivers and mountains that were only seemingly familiar. The accompanying texts compliment the pictures in a laconic telegraph style, providing a kind of a oral history without scientific pretensions. Their significance for science is only due to their permanent documentation in the context of the Colonial Picture Archive.

Notwithstanding the successful conservation of the historical image information and its online presentation, making it accessible to scientists worldwide, the work of the Colonial Picture Archive of the University Library of Frankfurt/Main has not yet reached an end. On the one hand, due to their intrinsic historical value, it is important that the original image carriers be permanently restored and preserved. On the other, the descriptions found in today's database, although mostly taken from the original captions on the pictures or picture sleeves, are to some extent incorrect and in every case incomplete. This calls for a systematic examination, in order that this unique historical source can be developed in sufficient detail for research.

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