The devil’s handwriting

By Ingrid Piller | April 5, 2018 | Intercultural communication

How is your Language-on-the-Move Reading Challenge coming along? Another month has passed and you should have ticked off the second book from our list. I read George Steinmetz’ *The Devil’s Handwriting* in the category “a book about language on the move in history (before mid-20th century)”. *The Devil’s Handwriting* examines the relationship between ethnographic representations of local people and colonial policy in three different German colonies in Africa, the Pacific and China.

Ethnography as the “devil’s handwriting”

*The Devil’s Handwriting* takes its title from the memoir of Paul Rohrbach (1869-1956), a German travel writer and colonial official. The memoir, published in 1953, when the Third Reich provided an ineluctable prism on the German colonial empire (1884-1918), advances the idea of a satanic mode of writing: travel writing such as that produced by the young Rohrbach about Africa and China had laid the basis for the evil of colonialism. Steinmetz makes this idea the central hypothesis of his fascinating inquiry and finds a close relationship between ethnographic representations and colonial policies. This may seem unsurprising and harks back to Edward Said’s dictum “from travelers’ tales [...] colonies were created” (*Orientalism*, p. 117).

What is surprising is the many different forms of colonial policy and practice that *The Devil’s Handwriting* reveals. Even in the relatively short-lived and comparatively small German colonial empire, colonial governance was highly variable. That variation cannot be explained by socioeconomic or materialist theories, as Steinmetz shows with reference to three specific colonies: Southwest Africa (present-day Namibia), Samoa and Qingdao (in Shandong province). Each of these held a distinct and very different place in the European imagination prior to colonization.

Abject and devious savages
Precolonial accounts of the people of Southwest Africa were extremely negative and represented them as sub-human savages. One 19th century German explorer, for instance, described the Khoikhoi as “bizarre red people” of “pronounced ugliness” with an “animal-like clicking language” (p. 154). The Germans did not invent these tropes of African abject savagery but fell back on the accounts of earlier European travelers. Already in 1612, for instance, a British official had described the Khoikhoi as “brute and savage, without religion, without language, without laws or government, without manners or humanity, and last of all without apparel” (p. 81; spelling adapted to modern English).

By the time the German colonial state arrived in Southwest Africa in the late 19th century, these negative representations of Africans as abject savages had become entrenched in the minds of Europeans. Additionally, these previous encounters added another dimension, namely that of devisiveness, shiftiness and insincere cunning. The Cape Colony, which had been under European (first Dutch, then British) rule since the late 17th century, had brought numerous Europeans – traders, settlers, explorers, soldiers and missionaries – to Southern Africa. 19th century German arrivals felt that contact with these earlier Europeans had served to corrupt the locals even further. One travel writer opined that “contact with civilization seems to make the savage more savage” (p. 156).

In this perverted logic, conversion to Christianity was seen to make the natives “worse” rather than “better”. One missionary, for instance, wrote in a letter: “According to many whites it is much easier to interact with a pagan who has had no contact, or very little, with the mission than with the baptized ones. [...] In many cases this is sadly often true” (p. 121, fn. 195)
These entrenched negative perceptions of Africans – as abject savages who had been further degraded through contact with Europeans – largely precluded any kind of engagement with them, as is particularly obvious from the fact that Europeans rarely attempted to learn local languages. In fact, many considered African languages unlearnable. The Khoikhoi language was variously described as similar to the “clucking of turkeys”, the “screaming of cocks” or to the sound of farting. This “apishly [rather] than articulately sounded” “incomprehensible” language kept frustrating Europeans:

*But while Europeans expressed frustration at being unable to learn the local tongue, Khoikhoi picked up English or Dutch very quickly. Europeans seemed incapable of reaching the obvious conclusion that the locals had more linguistic talent than their foreign visitors. (p. 82)*

The Europeans’ staunch belief in their own superiority meant that they wanted to transform Africans. Their assumption that communication and meaningful interaction were difficult, if not impossible, meant that they considered force and violence the preferred mode of engagement. Consequently, colonial policy aimed to seize the land and livestock of local populations in order to turn them into a “deracinated, atomized proletariat” (p. 203). Where locals resisted, extreme violence was readily used, as in the 1904 “Annihilation Order”, which ushered in the 20th century’s first genocide, of the OvaHerero.

![2014 exhibition of (pre)colonial South Pacific photos at the Hamburg Museum of Anthropology entitled “A view of paradise”](image)

**Noble savages**

In hindsight, the OvaHerero Genocide is often read as a precursor to the Holocaust and an indicator that German colonialism was exceptionally brutal and destructive. Steinmetz, however, contends that this argument suffers from a methodological error, namely the lack of comparison with other national cases. It is not his aim to compare German colonialism with the colonialism of other European nations although he does point out in passing similarities of the OvaHerero Genocide with the extermination of Tasmanian Aborigines and the Queensland Frontier Wars between 1840 and 1897. Steinmetz advances the comparative case “intranationally” with reference to two other German colonies, Samoa and Qingdao. Although these were part of the German colonial empire at the same time as Southwest Africa, colonialism played out quite differently there.
European ideas about Samoa, as of the South Pacific generally, were rather different to those they had of
African. Like Africans, Samoans were portrayed as inferior savages. However, in contrast to Africans, Samoans
were considered beautiful, noble and virtuous and were thought to live in paradise in harmony with nature.

German enthrallment with Samoans coupled with their belief in racial hierarchies produced some absurd
ideological maneuvers. For instance, when German settlers in 1934 (by which time Samoa was a colony of
New Zealand) formed a chapter of the Nazi party, they duly made a case that Samoas were “Aryans”. Crazy as
that may seem, Samoans were not the only ones whose “race” kept changing in European eyes:

_one of the most absurd aspects of European discussions of “race” during the nineteenth
century is the way in which certain populations “changed color” as their relative standing
within comparative ethnographic discourse shifted. Thus, the Witbooi changed from black
to yellow after 1894 [...] and the Chinese changed from white to yellow over the course of
the nineteenth century. Samoans underwent a process of racial lightening, becoming
more like the early image of Tahitians – who themselves began to seem swarthier to
Europeans as they lost their charm.” (p. 302)

In short, by the late 19th
century, Samoa had
become paradise in the
European imagination.
Therefore, the aim of
colonial policy was not to
change Samoans but – to
the contrary – to keep them
in their supposed
paradisiacal state. To
achieve that the use of
explicit force was rarely
considered and the idea
was that the colonial state
would offer a firm paternal
hand. In contrast to
Southwest Africa, where
the possibility of learning
local languages did not
seem to enter the minds of
Europeans, it did in Samoa.
The colony was governed through the medium of Samoan and, to a lesser degree, English. Colonial officials
periodically responded to reprimands from Berlin and pointed out that the use of German in the South Pacific
was not practical. The two German colonial governors (Samoa was a German colony for only 14 years) both
became proficient Samoan speakers, adopted Samoan titles and styled themselves as traditional Samoan
chiefs. Their identification with the colony was such that one of them declared himself to be Polynesian when
he was no longer in office.

“Looking into paradise” was not innocent: “scientific” photography in physical
anthropology, Samoa, ca. 1875 (held in the collection of the Hamburg
Anthropology Museum)
An advanced civilization

Just to be clear, it is not Steinmetz’ intention to argue that Samoan colonialism was “good”. All colonialism involves subjugation and exploitation, and Samoa was no exception. In fact, he trains his eye not on the colonized but the colonizers and his argument revolves around one of the perennial problems of intercultural communication: the ways in which stereotypes inform action. While European stereotypes about Africans and Samoans were relatively consistent, this was not the case with China.

China had been known to Europeans since the Middle Ages and hence there was significant variability in the ways it was represented in ethnographic writing. From early vague views of a fabled land emerged a highly positive representation starting with the 16th century Jesuits of China as a well-ordered advanced society that was superior to Europe. These discourses of Sinophilia were in the 19th century complemented with yet another, now negative, strand of representations of Chinese as members of an inferior race. While negative views started to gain currency, the earlier positive representations never died out entirely and so discourses about China were always much more poly-vocal than was the case with Africa and the South Pacific.

The transformation of Sinophilia into Sinophobia was, of course, tied to colonial expansion at the time and another emerging idea was “that China was ‘crying aloud for foreign conquest’” (p. 389). The Germans particularly coveted a colonial port similar to what the British had with Hong Kong and so they annexed Qingdao on the east coast in 1897. The first couple of years of colonial rule saw a focus on aggressive segregation between the colonizers and the colonized. However, this hostile approach did not last long, not least because colonial officials from the military were increasingly replaced with administrators who had a background in Chinese studies or had previously worked as translators and interpreters.

Many of the Qingdao colonial officials were graduates of the Oriental Languages Department at the University of Berlin, a language-training institute with the mission to prepare graduates for the foreign service. Graduates achieved high levels of proficiency in Chinese and imbibed a spirit of Sinophilia. Putting these men in charge of colonial policy resulted in “a program of rapprochement, syncretism, and exchange between two civilizations conceptualized as different but relatively equal in value” (p. 470).

A bilingual high school and college were founded with the aim to orient Chinese
elites towards Germany. The high school employed Chinese teachers to teach Chinese, math, physics and chemistry, and German teachers to teach German and history. In contrast to colonial schools elsewhere, there was no religious instruction and Christian holidays were not observed. The college similarly aimed at an equilibrium between German and Chinese elements and offered a mixed curriculum. Institutions such as these and the colonial policies they were based on “took for granted that China was an advanced civilization on a level equal to that of Europe. Opening these floodgates within a colonial context pointed beyond European claims to sovereignty and supremacy, beyond colonialism” (p. 534).

**Beyond colonialism?**

German colonialism ended with Germany’s defeat in World War I and its unconditional surrender. This did not mean independence for its colonies but a change in occupying power. Southwest Africa was assigned to South Africa, Samoa to New Zealand and Qingdao came under Japanese occupation.

The afterlife of German colonialism is highly variable, too. Discussions with [Namibia over reparations and a formal apology are ongoing](https://www.cnn.com/2023/04/26/world/south-africa-namibia-apology-intl-hnk/index.html) although, as Steinmetz points out, the economic structures created by colonialism remain in place, with 30% of all Namibian farms owned by Germans or their descendants. In Samoa, German colonialism seems largely forgotten or, at least, not a matter of public debate; and Qingdao is capitalizing on its German heritage by having it turned into a tourist attraction.

Overall, *The Devil’s Handwriting* is a brilliant historical study of a key question in intercultural communication: how are discourses of culture related to practices in intercultural engagement? My brief overview here cannot do justice to the wealth of detail it offers but anyone interested in history, colonialism and intercultural communication will enjoy this book. Another highly recommended!

Happy reading! And don’t forget to share your progress. If you tweet about it and mention [@ig_on_the_move](https://twitter.com/ig_on_the_move), you’ll be in the running for our monthly draw of a copy of *Intercultural Communication*. The March winner has been announced on Twitter:
Each month we celebrate the #Language-on-the-Move community by gifting a copy of Ingrid Piller's "Intercultural Communication" @EdinburghUP to one of our interactive followers. The March winner is @KhawlaBadwan. Who will get lucky in April?

9:19 AM - Apr 2, 2018

34 See Language on the Move’s other Tweets

Related content, Reading Challenge

- Globalization between crime and piety
- Language on the Move Reading Challenge 2018

Related content, Intercultural communication and colonialism

- What makes foreigners weird? A quick guide to orientalism
- Yiman doesn't have a word for massacre
- Intercultural communication and imperialism
- What would you do?