

## Of Phallic Stele, Heroes and Ancient Cultures. Adolf Ellegard Jensen's Research in Southern Ethiopia

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Adolf Ellegard Jensen, born in northern Germany in 1899, came to social anthropology, as so many people of his time did, via detours. [1] After serving as a soldier in World War I, he initially studied mathematics, natural sciences and philosophy. In 1923, immediately following his dissertation, he became an assistant of Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) at his Institute for Cultural Morphology (Georget/Ivanoff/Kuba 2016). [2] Frobenius soon resumed his research activities in Africa, which he had started before World War I. Jensen accompanied him on research trips to South Africa (1928-30) and Libya (1932), where Frobenius' main focus was the documentation of rock paintings (Kohl, Kuba and Ivanoff 2016). At the same time, Jensen worked on his habilitation thesis, on a comparative study of initiation rites, which he completed in 1933 (Jensen 1933).

This article is intended to give a brief overview of Jensen's contribution to the anthropology of southern Ethiopia. It begins with the research expeditions that Jensen led to Ethiopia in the 1930s and 1950s and then gives an insight into the results and methods of the researchers around Jensen. The article ends with Jensen's role as founder of German anthropological

research in southern Ethiopia, which continues to this day.

## In Search of Phallic Stele

It was also in the 1930s that Jensen's research interest in southern Ethiopia was set in motion. At that time the Frobenius Institute, apart from social anthropology, was also concerned with pre- and early history. Jensen was aware of the descriptions of the French archaeologists Francois Azaïs and Roger Chambard of the large number of monoliths to be found in southern Ethiopia (Azaïs and Chambard 1931). Between the 1930s and 1960s, megalithic monuments such as these were eagerly investigated all over the world and fitted into one of the major paradigms of anthropologists focusing on culture history (Braukämper 2015:210). Stirred by the French researchers' discovery of prehistoric stele, Jensen led the first Frobenius expedition to Ethiopia in October 1934. He seemed to have had the aim to make similar discoveries. Jensen and his team [3] travelled along the lakes of the Rift Valley until finally, on a small hill (locally called Tutto Fela) in the Gedeo area, they found what they were searching for: around one hundred phallus-shaped stone steles with incised faces and geometrical patterns (Thubauville 2018:5)

Such anthropomorphic steles, existent in many parts of Ethiopia, mark the graves of departed heroes. They are one element of the "meritorious complex" (*Verdienstwesen*) that fascinated Jensen and his team and became one of their main research foci. According to their findings, the "meritorious complex" consisted of three elements: honorary rewards for the killing of wild game or enemies, feasts of merit associated with such honorary positions, and lavish funeral ceremonies during which memorial monuments were erected (Braukämper 2015: 205). This complex, which is spread over the whole globe (Haberland 1957), was also found in other parts of southern Ethiopia, especially among the Oromo, the Highland East Cushitic-speaking and the Omotic-speaking peoples. In comparison with other places, in southern Ethiopia the act of killing wild game or enemies was particularly important (Haberland 1957: 331). Shortly after the first expeditions of the Frobenius Institute to southern Ethiopia, game hunting and traditional warfare were banned and increasingly controlled by the government, and the number of cattle needed for big feasts was dramatically reduced, yet during their stays in the 1930s and 1950s, the described cultural complex was still in full bloom. Behind the complex of heroism and killing, Jensen saw the inseparable unity between the destruction and the recreation of life (Braukämper 2015:206), one of his main research interests that he also described in mythic themes: "The eternal cycle of birth, procreation, and death and the necessity to destroy life in order to be able to live" (Jensen 1965: 200).



Fig. 1.

Map of the 1934-1935 expedition to Ethiopia.

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From the European point of view, the south of Ethiopia was still a *terra incognita* at that time and Jensen writes that it was difficult, even in Addis Ababa, to get any valid information on the existence and state of roads in the south of the country (Jensen 1936). The southernmost point they reached was Konso. There, Jensen did pioneering research on the age grade system (*gada* system) and *waka* (wooden memorial stele). In May 1935 Jensen and his team returned to Germany. Within a year after his return to Frankfurt, Jensen had already managed to publish the findings in the voluminous monograph *Im Lande des Gada* (In the land of Gada). In the following year of 1937, Jensen led a second research expedition, this time to Ceram.

After his return to Frankfurt, difficult years followed. Frobenius died in 1938. Jensen was his designated successor, but because Jensen's second wife was of Jewish origin, he lost the permit to lecture at the university. Furthermore, he could not be appointed as the new director of the Frobenius Institute. Finally, in 1939 he had to join the war as a soldier. During World War II, when not only Jensen, but also all other male researchers had been recruited as soldiers, the female members of the institute were very successful in keeping some activities going and rescuing the institute and its collections (Beer 2006; Stappert 2019a). One of them was Elisabeth Pauli (1906-1984) (Stappert 2019b), a trained painter who had joined the institute in 1933, and was later to become Jensen's third wife. After the end of Nazi rule and his return from captivity in September 1945, the political situation had changed in Jensen's favour. He was appointed director of the Museum für Völkerkunde in Frankfurt, was soon rehabilitated at the university and in 1946 received the newly established chair for social anthropology at the University of Frankfurt. In 1949 Jensen was also elected the first full director of the German Anthropological Association after World War II.

## Documenting *Terra Incognita*

Jensen enjoyed his research trip to Ethiopia in 1934/35, especially the Konso [4] region.

Therefore, as soon as it seemed possible again to carry out research trips after World War II, Jensen and Pauli began to prepare the next expedition to southern Ethiopia. In 1950 two young research assistants, Eike Haberland (1924-1992) and Willy Schulz-Weidner (1916-2004), joined the institute and the expedition. Both of them had just earned their PhDs in anthropology: Schulz-Weidner from the University of Mainz and Haberland, as a student of Jensen, from Frankfurt. The four team members left Frankfurt in September 1950 and were the first German social anthropologists to go on expedition after World War II. Although they planned to travel as far south as Chew Bahir and the Dassanach people in Ethiopia, logistical problems, especially the shortage of mules, prevented them from reaching further south than the Hamar Mountains. Once they had reached the south of the country, the research team split up to study as many ethnic groups as possible.



Fig. 2.

Fig. 2: Jensen with girl passers-by in Konso, 1951.

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After returning from Ethiopia in summer 1952, Jensen and Pauli got married. Brought together by their passion for Ethiopia, Jensen, Pauli and Haberland seem to have formed a harmonious team for expeditions. The three researchers also formed the core of the next research undertaking to south Ethiopia, which left in 1954. The young social anthropologist Helmut Straube (1923-1984) and the cultural geographer Helmut Kuls (1920-2002) joined the endeavour. During this expedition Jensen and Pauli did their main research among the Sidama and Gedeo.



Fig. 3.

Map of the 1950-52 expedition to Ethiopia.

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While the first research trip in 1934/35 had the clear focus of locating and documenting stone stele in southern Ethiopia, the expeditions in the 1950s aimed at yet another research interest of the Frobenius Institute: Jensen and his team tried to reconstruct the cultural history of the ethnic groups of southern Ethiopia, as they understood them as “fragments” of more ancient cultures (*Altvölker*) that represented different epochs of cultural development (Bustorf 2015: 185f). For example, Jensen justified the research interest behind his new stay in Gedeo as follows:

The renewed work with the Gedeo seemed to be necessary mainly because of some indications that we could find an older layer of the old tuber farmers in the Gedeo culture almost without any influence from cattle breeding, more clearly than in the cultures of all other peoples we visited. This assumption has not been confirmed, as all the characteristics of the cultural layer with livestock breeding, which is widespread in southern Ethiopia, can also be found in them. In this respect, however, the assumption was supported when we found some clearer signs of ancient plant cultural affiliation among the Gedeo; I have already pointed out such signs [5] and will continue to emphasize them explicitly in the future. [6]



Fig. 4.

Jensen and Pauli on a hill in the Aari mountains, 1951.

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## Outcomes of Two Decades of Research on Southern Ethiopia

While many of the research results of Jensen's expeditions to Ethiopia in the 1930s and 1950s were published, others remained unfinished in the archives of the Frobenius Institute. In addition to numerous scientific articles, Jensen published two major ethnographies on southern Ethiopia: *Im Lande des Gada* (1936), *Altvölker Süd-Äthiopiens* (1959). [7] Jensen had planned and prepared more ethnographies, which he did not publish for several reasons that can only be speculated about today. Jensen had severe health problems after his last Ethiopian expedition, and at the same time the survey-like style and content of the ethnographies became more and more outdated with each year that they remained unpublished. The three unpublished manuscripts include ethnographies of the Gedeo, Sidama and Konso. These ethnographies – all written in the German language – have so far only been accessible via the archive of the Frobenius Institute. To make them available to a wider circle, they are currently being translated and published in the series *Southern Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute*. [8]

Like a major survey, Jensen's ethnographies provide, above all, a short overview of the social organization, religious life, life cycle, material culture, and oral history of the studied peoples. The appendices of the ethnographies contain drawings of material culture as well as a good number of photographs. Today, these ethnographies represent a unique documentation of southern Ethiopia, for both ethnographical and historical reasons. When Jensen did his research, the proselytization of the local population by foreign missionaries had not yet started. The proselytization that occurred during the 1960s, in addition to the socialistic regime which ruled Ethiopia between 1974 and 1987, introduced radical cultural and social changes for the population of southern Ethiopia. Jensen and his team were among the few scientists who had the chance to document southern Ethiopia before these changes.

Jensen followed Frobenius in his strong focus on visual documentation of research and



collection of material culture. Today about than 15,000 photographs and sketches, 83 film reels (see Thubauville 2017) and numerous ethnographic objects [9] (see Glück 2017) which were taken and collected from southern Ethiopia in the 1930s and '50s, can be found in the archives of the Frobenius Institute. While nearly all the research outcomes were pioneering works, since not much ethnographic research had been done before in southern Ethiopia, the comprehensive visual documentation that resulted from Jensen's expeditions to southern Ethiopia is particularly extraordinary.

Apart from the visual documentation, the archives of the Frobenius Institute also hold notebooks, letters, scripts for lectures, hand-drawn maps and many other written documents from Jensen's research. [10] The institute also has a special administrative archive, which provides an insight into the financing of the expeditions to Ethiopia (see Dinslage 2017), but also into the scientific contacts of the researchers. Between 2014 and 2017, the project of "Indexing and digitizing of the archival material on Ethiopian Studies of the Frobenius Institute", financed by the German Research Foundation, indexed and sustainably archived all of the above-mentioned material. The project enabled public access to these documents through an open-access database. [11]

## Methodology – Emperor, Police and Old Wise Men

Continuous contact with Emperor Haile Selassie was necessary to smooth the way for the research activities of Jensen and the other institute members. They regularly met the ruler after arriving in Ethiopia to inform him about the research plans and obtain his permission and support. He personally allowed the researchers to transport items of cultural heritage like the phallus-shaped stone stele from Gedeo to Germany (Thubauville 2012: 86-88). Furthermore, his letters of recommendation guaranteed them the constant help of the administration and police forces in the south of the country. Policemen and other administrative personnel of the imperial regime were essential for the work of the expedition members as they supplied them with accommodation, helped in locating food supplies and pack animals and were often the only people who could translate local languages to Amharic or English. The use of administrators and policemen as intermediators, of course, was a limitation at the same time, especially when it came to translations.



Fig. 5.

Jensen in audience with Emperor Haile Selassie, 1950.

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Jensen's research was more shaped and determined by his informants and translators than he stated in his publications. He had a very basic command of Amharic and worked mostly with translators who could translate for him into English or French. Because of the linguistic diversity in southern Ethiopia, he often needed two translators, one from the local languages into Amharic and one from Amharic into English or French. Sometimes words in the native tongue of the translators found their way into Jensen's notebooks or even his publications, for example during his research in Gedeo in 1954 when his translator was a native Oromo.

Neither in his publications, nor in his notebooks did Jensen acknowledge his translators and informants appropriately as partners in knowledge production as would be expected by today's standards. There are several reasons that may lie behind this shortcoming. First of all his expeditions to southern Ethiopia followed a very tight research programme with the aim of documenting what was then a *terra incognita*. Jensen even formulated common research interests and rules the participants had to adhere to. [12] Jensen therefore did not stay long in one place, which inevitably led to relations with informants remaining superficial. However, especially for such enormous expeditions covering such a large amount of ethnic groups and places, the number of informants mentioned by him is very small (Bustorf 2017: 147). Only key informants were mentioned, but again details on which information Jensen received from them is mostly missing.

Many of Jensen's key informants were typical for his way of working and thinking: they were 'wise old men' (Dinslage and Thubauville 2017). Most of them had ritual or political offices, very few were ordinary people, and female informants were not mentioned at all. These old men were seen by Jensen as carriers of an older knowledge, and therefore not as individuals but representatives of their culture (Bustorf 2017: 147), which might again explain, but not justify why their individual names were only rarely mentioned.

Researchers such as Jensen, and research in Germany in general, certainly faced substantial difficulties before, during, and even after World War II, but one can see from the archival material that Jensen remained in contact with international colleagues, had access to international publications, and participated in international conferences. In view of this, it is



perhaps surprising that he held on to the institute's very distinct methodology and theory, which – from today's critical perspective – was inadequate (see Streck 2018). While participant observation has been a defining part of anthropological fieldwork since Malinowski (1922), the members of the Frobenius Institute continued their survey-like research style in groups of several researchers. Staying in places for only short periods of a few weeks or months did not allow the Frobenius researchers to learn local languages to a conversational level. Their obsession with cultural history (see Bustorf 2014) made them spend most of their time and effort on recording oral histories from male elders instead of describing the present.

## A Founder of German Anthropological Research in Southern Ethiopia

Jensen died in 1965 shortly after taking his retirement and receiving an extensive two-volume Festschrift by his colleagues. His disciple Haberland (1924-1992) became the new director of the Frobenius Institute in 1968. He initiated three more research expeditions to southern Ethiopia in which he also involved promising researchers like Ulrich Braukämper (1944-2018) and Werner Lange (1946-). Furthermore, he was also interested in close academic cooperation between the two countries and attracted Ethiopian PhD students to study at the Frobenius Institute, amongst them Lij Asfa-Wossen Asserate, a great-nephew of Emperor Haile Selassie, and Negaso Gidada, [13] who later became the first president of Ethiopia. Haberland continued the focus on Ethiopian studies, which had been initiated by Jensen, until his death in 1992. While the focus on Ethiopian studies at the Frobenius Institute ended with the death of Haberland and departure of Braukämper, it was continued by Braukämper in Göttingen and Straube in Munich, both of whom had been initiated into the subject at the Frobenius Institute. Therefore, the influence of the Frobenius research tradition influenced Ethiopian studies in Germany even after the 1990s.

The research of Jensen and his colleagues also had an impact on German researchers outside the Frobenius Institute. Ivo Strecker and his wife Jean Lydall, who were looking out for an interesting place to carry out their research at the end of the 1960s, were captivated by Jensen's publication *Altvölker Südäthiopiens* with its amazing photographs and set off for southern Ethiopia (Strecker 2015:213f). With their post-colonial and post-modernist research approach, the work of Strecker and Lydall was as different as could be from the cultural historical approach of Jensen and Haberland, giving the voice back to the local people instead of hardly mentioning any research partners by name. Ironically, the son of the Hamar spokesman Berinas, whom Jensen called a 'quiet person who could not be used for explanations' (Jensen 1959:339), became Lydall's and Strecker's closest confidant, explaining his own culture competently and in great detail to the anthropologist couple and also to a wider audience through a publication (Lydall and Strecker 1979). Nevertheless, their engagement was a continuation of German anthropological research in exactly the same area of southern Ethiopia. Still as a professor at the University of Mainz, Strecker initiated the South Omo Research Centre, which would become the central location and platform for

debate for researchers in the area. During their still-ongoing research activities, Strecker and Lydall – together with their close colleague Günther Schlee at the Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology (Schlee and Gabbert 2015) – have already interested numerous young German, Ethiopian and international scholars in the region.

## Final remarks

Jensen started his research in southern Ethiopia in the 1930s, when the area was mostly still a *terra incognita* for Europeans – and with his team tried to collect any information he could find on the history, beliefs and livelihood of the various ethnic groups. Jensen's research took place before Protestant missions converted the local population in large numbers and before the socialist revolution. Both factors later led to radical cultural and social change among the peoples of Ethiopia. As there exist no other descriptions of this region from that time, his accounts are a cultural archive of great value today for anthropologists, historians and people of this research area, even though they contain partly superficial and patchy descriptions of the people of southern Ethiopia (Abbink 2017: 171f).

In addition to his long-term research trips and extensive publications, Jensen also succeeded in interesting numerous young researchers in the region. Their students and successors still ensure that German anthropologists continue research in southern Ethiopia today.

**Abstract:** In the 1930s and 1950s the German social anthropologist Adolf Ellegard Jensen (1899-1965) led three major research expeditions of the Frobenius Institute to southern Ethiopia. He did pioneering research in this region of the world. His committed and well-documented research work leaves behind not only classic ethnographies of southern Ethiopia and well-filled archives at the Frobenius Institute, but also a tradition of German anthropological research and cooperation with southern Ethiopia that extends to the present day.

**Keywords:** German-Speaking Ethnology/Völkerkunde | National-Socialism | Germany | Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) | Ethiopia | Indonesia | African Studies | African civilizations | Cultural history | Cultural diffusion and migrations | Anthropology of religion | Mythology

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[1] Some parts of this paper have been taken and/or rephrased from Thubauville 2018.

[2] Leo Frobenius launched his institute as 'Afrika Archiv' in 1898 in Berlin as a private foundation. In 1920 he transferred it to Munich, where it was renamed Research Institute for Culture Morphology ('Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie'). In 1925 this institute moved to Frankfurt am Main, where it was attached to the university.

[3] Jensen was accompanied by the secondary school teacher Hellmut Wohlenberg, the artist Alf Bayrle, and Helmut von den Steinen. Von den Steinen was only loosely connected to the rest of the team and went directly to the Amhara region in the north of Ethiopia.

[4] In the travel report of the 1950–1952 expedition (archive of the Frobenius Institute, register number EH 41), Pauli writes for example that after a long and tedious journey the “association of Konso friends” had reached the “promised land”.

[5] See Jensen 1936.

[6] Unpublished Gedeo manuscript of Jensen (archive of the Frobenius Institute, register number EH 70).

[7] A list of Jensen's publications on southern Ethiopia can be accessed here <https://www.frobenius-institut.de/images/Digitalisierungsprojekt/researcher/Bibliographie.pdf>.

[8] Jensen's Gedeo manuscript is planned as a first publication in autumn 2020.

[9] The collection contains a total of 1200 objects from Ethiopia, which were collected under the direction of Jensen and Haberland.

[10] The whereabouts of written material of the first expedition to southern Ethiopia in 1934/35 are unfortunately not known. The photographs taken during his research trip are archived in the photo archive of the Frobenius Institute.

[11] <https://www.frobenius-institut.de/en/collections-and-archives/ethiopia-database>

[12] A formulation of the rules for the expedition 1954–55 by Jensen can be found in the institute's archives (register number AEJ 41). Among other information, it concerns the expected working hours, ownership rights, and required publications in the institute's name.

[13] Lij Asfa-Wossen Assef earned his PhD from the University of Frankfurt in 1978 and Negaso Gidada in 1984.