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The Expeditions of Leo Frobenius between Science and Politics: Nigeria 1910-1912

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Dossier "Leo Frobenius" coordonné par Hélène Ivanoff et Richard Kuba

Much has been written on European travellers in Africa. [1] Admired in colonial times as civilizing heroes to later be damned as the spearhead of European imperialism, their role must be seen today in more differentiating terms. Beyond simple idealization or condemnation, it is more than worthwhile to look again at the writings that emerged from these travels in order to rediscover what they actually tell us about that old, long since disappeared world of pre- and early colonial Africa. Despite their inherent distortions, a result of their need to meet popular imagination and the spirit of their age, they are frequently the earliest written records and as such, a valuable source of historical information.

On the other hand, travel writing is also the most important source for understanding how the image of Africa was formed in Europe during the last two centuries. Travelogues were the keyhole by which means Europeans could view this nearby, yet so distant, continent. Travelogues were also a herald of the expansion of a new global media in the late 19th century. Stanley's "In Darkest Africa", for example, was one of the first global bestsellers in the 1890s. Leo Frobenius, born in 1873, reported how in his youth he devoured every piece of

travel literature on Africa he could find. His life's dream to follow in the footsteps of these great explorer personalities matured during this time.

The question of what kind of information a travelogue conveys about a country or a continent and to what degree it can serve as a historical source is also valid for Frobenius' own writings. This much is certain: a great deal depended on how a traveller travelled. Who financed the expedition and which scholarly, economic or political interests were at stake? Not to be neglected is also the traveller's personal background, how educated he was and whether he spoke one or more of the local languages. Another key criterion was also the form an expedition took: did the traveller move alone, at the mercy of local generosity and local contacts, dependent entirely on the conditions on the ground, or was he part of a larger expedition that could function relatively autonomously (Spittler 1987).

In the following I will closely trace the route and context of Frobenius' expedition to Nigeria and explore what can be gleaned about everyday expedition life and about his "dark companions" (Simpson 1975; Heintze 2002), the African assistants who were much more vital to the success of an enterprise than the vast majority of such travellers would have admitted. [Fig.1]

Fig. 1

Leo Frobenius cheered by a crowd in Frankfurt/Main after returning from his 12th expedition to Africa in 1935

(Frobenius Institute, FoA vi-VP160108)

Travel Motivations

Frobenius' 12 African expeditions undertaken between 1904 and 1933 were motivated by a concern for general enlightenment. His vision of a "real, old, warm-blooded culture" in Africa was quite progressive in a time when significant cultural achievements in Africa were at best ascribed to the civilizing influence of Islam. In his eyes, the cultural expressions of non-literate peoples were no less part of an archive of humanity than those of the classical ancient civilizations. Frobenius loved "everything that was African" and was "full of respect for these people and their culture." This love nevertheless tended to blind him to the

condition of the people he actually met in Africa. He was often only able to apprehend them against the background of the continent's magnificent cultural history as he had imagined it (see, for example, Soyinka 1986 for a critique). He saw only ruins left of those noble and ancient civilizations that he enthusiastically compared with those of Atlantis and Byzantium.

The idea that the ancient cultures of Africa had necessarily been doomed to decay under the onslaught of modernity was another motivation for his travels. In one of his letters from Nigeria, Frobenius wrote: "I have seen no other colony so far, in which the culture is so close to its end than here in Yoruba [land]." It was his goal to explore whatever remained of the continent's ancient cultures as comprehensively and systematically as possible. Impulsive, passionate, often improvising and not always open about his sources, he drew together what is likely a unique documentation of objects and customs, folk tales and myths, everyday scenes and architecture. Threatened by modernization, these cultural artefacts could at least be preserved in museums, archives and monographs.

Finally, personal ambition also played a role. Many Europeans travelling in Africa came from the lower ranks of society and their African expeditions often opened the doors to high society for them. This is to some extent also true for Frobenius. Although he was a child of the educated middle class, his 12 African expeditions opened up contacts to him in the highest circles of society and to the German Emperor himself (Franzen et al. 2012). A certain amount of self-glorification, of one's own courage and determination, is essential for realizing this goal. Frobenius was, in addition, a clever media strategist, providing various German newspapers with regular short articles directly from the field. This practice, together with his many books which he wrote in a popular and accessible tone, contributed to his becoming one of the most famous scholars of his time in Germany.

Fig. 2

Albrecht Martius (1884 – 1970), the engineer accompanying the expedition

(Frobenius Institute, FoA 04-vi-VP150612)

Frobenius was well qualified for his expeditions, considering he had unparalleled knowledge of the great span of literature on Africa and the many ethnographic objects that had already

accumulated in ethnographic museums over the course of the 19th century. His major shortcoming was probably his lack of language skills. He could speak French quite well, but his English remained rudimentary all his life. While he collected the vocabulary of about 900 African languages, he spoke none of them beyond a few words. This means that he was usually dependent on translators and often on whole translator chains, translating, for example, from Jukun to Hausa, then from Hausa into English and finally into German.

Fig. 3

Carl Arriens, the expedition's painter in a Tiv village

(Frobenius Institute, FoA 04-5785)

Travel Writing

Accompanied by the young engineer Albrecht Martius, [Fig.2] who was responsible for sketching the architecture and tracing the ground plans, and the expedition's painter and photographer Carl Arriens, [Fig.3] Frobenius arrived in mid-October 1910 in Lagos. After 14 months in Nigeria and Cameroon, he had to terminate his trip in December 1911 due to illness, leaving Albert Martius to spend a few more months alone in Nigeria. Unlike Frobenius' first expedition to the Congo (1904–1906) or his second through Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Togo (1907–1909), no chronological travelogue of his expedition to Nigeria was ever published. The three-volume work "Und Afrika Sprach…", the abridged "popular edition" of which was in turn translated into English ("The Voice of Africa"), [Fig.4] is primarily a summary of cultural history interspersed with episodes from the expedition. In addition, five of the 12-volume "Atlantis" series include Nigerian folk tales gathered during the expedition. [2] [Fig.5] Frobenius' handwritten diaries and letters kept in the archives of the Frobenius Institute have not yet been systematically evaluated.

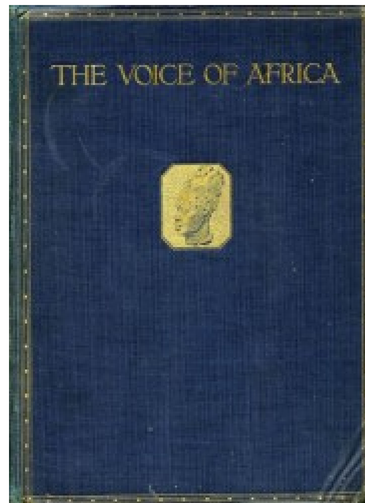

Fig. 4

Book cover of Frobenius' expedition report The Voice of Africa, published in 1913

However, the two books published in 1924 and 1928 by the expedition painter Carl Arriens provide a good insight into the journey. There, much of the travelling is recounted in detail, although it remains notable that the context in which the expedition took place – and Leo Frobenius himself – finds virtually no mention. Arriens' books are a mixture of stereotypes typical of the time as well as a broad enlightenment gesture. With the exception of several derogatory remarks, he speaks of the undeniable intelligence of Africans and the fact that "certain ideas about the lazy Negro intent on doing nothing all day belong to the realm of fable" (Arriens 1928: 17). Like Frobenius, Arriens is also sceptical about the influence of Europe on Africa. Among the Koma on the borders of Adamawa, he claimed to have found a romantic ideal of ancestral life and combines this with a criticism of his own contemporary society: [Fig.6]

> Are these people less content than we demanding Europeans with our innerly rotten civilization? Presumably, the opposite is the case, because they are content in mind, are of perfect health and grow as old as Methuselah. They also fail to make each other's lives as sour as we 'highly cultivated' Europeans do. (Arriens 1928: 88)

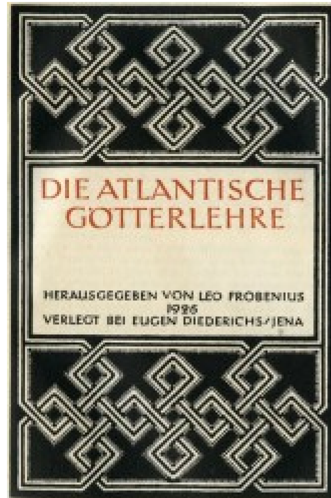

Fig. 5

Book cover of Frobenius' Die atlantische Götterlehre (The Atlantic Theogony) published in 1926 and containing Yoruba folklore

The description of urban life in Lagos stands in stark contrast to the above depiction. Frobenius is particularly outraged when he writes about the emerging emancipation of the educated and economically successful Lagosians from the colonial administration and the lack of respect that the whites are paid (Frobenius 1912: 37–42; 1913 I: 38–41).

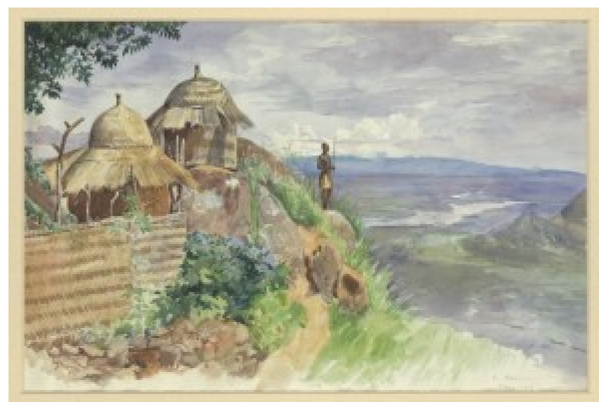

Fig. 6

Arcadian view of a Koma village painted by Carl Arriens in 1911

(Frobenius Institute, EBA-B 00486)

Travel finances

On his previous tour through West Africa (1907–1909), Frobenius had already intended to follow the course of the Niger to the ocean. [Fig.7] Nigeria was certainly very tempting since this was where the elaborate bronze works of art from Benin in the Ethnological Museum in Berlin came from, the plunder of a British Expeditionary Corps. Here the culture seemed older and deeper than in the rest of Africa. On the other hand, travelling in the British colony was comparatively expensive; the Nigerians had by that time already established their reputation as being quite business conscious. Given the depleted state of his finances in 1909,

Frobenius had to make the difficult decision to cut his expedition short and return via German Togo and Lomé to Germany. It may not be surprising then that the travelogue for this expedition was titled “Auf dem Wege nach Atlantis” (On the Way to Atlantis) (Frobenius 1911).

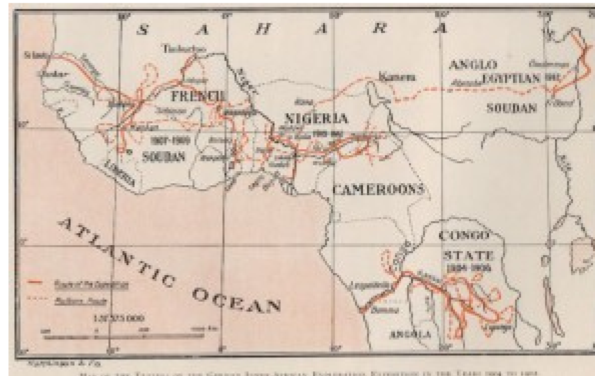

Fig. 7

Frobenius’ travels in West Africa

(Frobenius, The voice of Africa, 1913, vol. 1, p. 34-35)

Before his first expedition to the Congo (1904– 06), Frobenius signed a contract with the director of the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology. The contract guaranteed him 10 marks for each piece he shipped to Hamburg. It was a business based on reciprocity. Frobenius could realize his long-harboured dream of travelling to Africa, while the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology, in turn, gained an opportunity to acquire a high-quality collection. This issue had always been problematic for museums because the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin had been granted the priority purchase option for all objects collected in the colonies, to the exasperation of the other ethnographic museums in Germany which were left with the remainders (Zwernemann 1987). After the first two successful expeditions, the Hamburg Museum was again central in the financing of the Nigerian expedition, the cost of which Frobenius had estimated at around 90,000 marks. To pre-finance the initial costs, Frobenius took a bank credit out on his private collection of bows from around the world as well as a credit from the Association of West African Merchants. Thilenius, the Director of the Hamburg Museum of Ethnology, also sponsored him from his private fortune. [Fig.8]

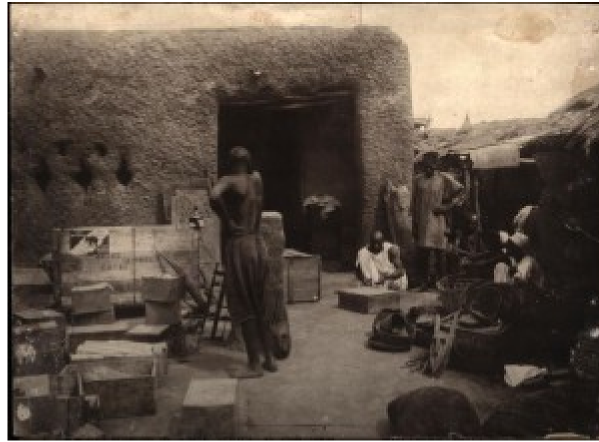

Fig. 8
Packing ethnographic objects for shipment 1908 in Bamako
(Frobenius Institute, EBA-A2 00234)

Frobenius complained in his first letters from Nigeria about the extraordinarily high costs. His father passed on repeated requests for fresh funds on behalf of his son. The Leipzig Museum of Ethnology put up further monies and later so did the Museum of Ethnology in Berlin. The expedition yielded a collection of 5,670 pieces from Nigeria, which was divided up between the three museums in Hamburg, Leipzig and Berlin.

We do not exactly know what kinds of objects Frobenius took to Nigeria as barter goods. Red cloth is mentioned, as are Arabian-style stirrups, silver daggers, as well as salt and cowry shells. A beautiful clay pot was purchased in Yorubaland for 400 cowries. By comparison, a list of the contents of the 78 boxes Frobenius had shipped by the Woermann Line to the Congo exists from his first expedition in 1904–1906 and gives the following: 200 enamel pots, 300 knives, 100 tobacco pipes, 30,000 ornamental pins, as well as combs, lacquered bowls and even some Japanese masks. Not all the objects obtained were bartered. In southern Nigeria, he frequently just bought them with pounds sterling, guineas and shillings.

The Caravan

The expedition's funding by museum sponsors affected the form of travel. Frobenius and his staff travelled with a caravan of carriers, always on the lookout for spectacular objects. [Fig.9] Like other travellers before him, Frobenius could not avoid the problems inherent in this form of travel. Counting all the porters, servants, boys, cooks, washer men, guides and interpreters, such a caravan could number close to one hundred individuals and was mostly busy with its own organization, which impeded the travellers' view of the surrounding world: staff had to be recruited, paid and dismissed; sufficient supplies, shelter and food had to be organized. When further away from larger settlements, such a caravan had to be permanently on the move in order to ensure an adequate food and water supply. When longer stops were taken, it was necessary to open the bundles and boxes to air out the valuable contents. The packages were repeatedly subject to rain or got wet during a river

crossing. There was a constant threat that the collected objects would rot if they were not dried and repacked properly. Apart from the fact that much time was spent with such organizational tasks, there was the intimidating effect that the unheralded arrival of such a caravan would have on a local population. Nevertheless, Frobenius was able to obtain an amazingly rich collection of oral traditions – also testifying to the strength of his financial resources – even if, due to the translation issue, their quality can often be questioned.

Fig. 9

The expedition's itinerary 1910-1912 through Nigeria and Cameroon

(Frobenius Institute, FoK004_000b)

Having landed in Lagos, a day-long train journey to Ibadan, at that time the largest city south of the Sahara, followed. It was important for Frobenius that he avoid the European district on the city's border in order to be closer to the people he wanted to study. The company found lodgings in the city centre, in the school building of the city chief, the Bale.

Arriens reports on the staff of the expedition, including Messa, the one-eyed Togolese cook, Ante, his assistant and the boy responsible for carrying the box of pots and pans, the washer man Akoda, the German-speaking "Togo boy" Max, a young man from Ashanti and Arriens' own boy James, a "youth from Yoruba" (Arriens 1928: 22, 76, 103-108)

Most importantly, however, was the interpreter Bida, who actually had another name and was a prince from Bida in Nupeland. [Fig.10] Frobenius had met Bida on his last journey through Mali, Burkina Faso and Togo. As a former sergeant in the colonial army in German Togo, Bida spoke a difficult to understand German, pidgin and a number of local languages including Ewe, Yoruba, Hausa and of course Nupe. Arriens wrote:

> The successful realization of the scientific expedition could hardly have been conceivable without the agency of so intelligent a native such as this man. He is chief of the black personnel, interpreter, travel organizer and principal negotiator in one person. (Arriens 1928: 22)

Fig. 10

Bida, Frobenius' main collaborator, interpreter, negotiator and organiser during the expedition

(Photography by Leo Frobenius, El-Obeid 1912, Frobenius Institute, FoA 05-6084)

Like the other Togolese staff, Bida had been taken up by Frobenius on his way from Germany in a stop by the steamer in Lomé. Most of them took part in the expedition not only because they wanted to earn extra money, but also because they had to pay back the debts that Frobenius had taken over for them. Frobenius would not have gotten far in Nigeria without Bida, who, for example, arranged the encounter with the Shango high priest in Ibadan or with a son of the Bale who "apparently owned interesting old things" (Arriens 1928: 23). He also orchestrated the contacts in Ife. In the conflict that developed there about allegedly stolen art (see on this Penny 2002: 116-222 and Platte 2010), Bida was the focus of the British administrator Partridge's anger. Bida was imprisoned for several days and beaten by police officers in an attempt to get him to incriminate Frobenius. [Fig.11] The latter rewarded his expedition manager for his loyalty, evident not only in this situation, with a princely salary of 700 marks. With a mixture of badgering, threats and substantial bribes, considerable pressure was put on the owners of objects of desire. How the procurement process actually took place is not always clear as exemplified by the differing reports of the purchase of an Ibedji figurine which Frobenius and his colleagues discovered among the goods of an old peddler woman in Ibadan. Here is Frobenius' version:

> We stopped and discussed the little wooden image. It proved to be a so-called Ibedji, an idol in memory of deceased twin-sisters. Without any great hope that anything would come of it, I asked her at the end of the conversation whether it might possibly be for sale and, to my great surprise, she answered quite briskly: 'Certainly'; she would bring me the Ibedji next day, but only wanted to buy another one first and prepare the necessary offerings for it and, after that, I could have this one. (Frobenius 1913: 54)

For Arriens the scene was more harrowing:

> The face of the peddler woman revealed her fear; she hid the idol at once and fell to her knees, mumbling explanations in a trembling voice. Through the interpreter, we learned the facts. The doll represented the twin sister who had died 50 years ago. She would make another doll, which would by means of the proper sacrifices and ceremonies provide a new vessel for the sister's spirit. Then the doll could be given to the foreigners. (Arriens 1928: 2)

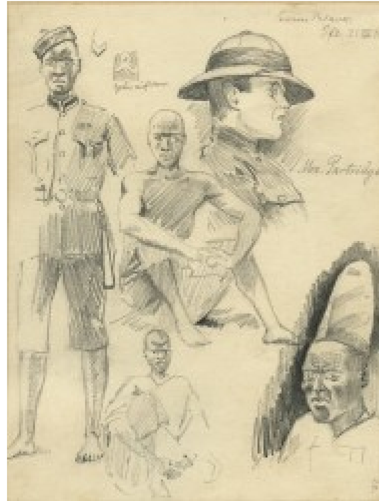

Fig. 11

"Great Palaver" A sketch by Carl Arriens showing scenes from the trial in Ife on December 21, 1910

(Frobenius Institute, KBA 11907)

The less than delicate approach taken by Frobenius caused him serious problems in Ife, where the local dignitaries called out the English authorities to intervene (cf. Penny 2002: 116-122, Platte 2010). Another source of repeated misunderstandings was the frequent requests to take photographs. Most people were more than reluctant to be photographed and attempts to take pictures of the interiors of temples and houses were at times greeted with open hostility. Arriens was often believed to have the evil eye and in Nupeland, he was accused of black magic. As was the case when purchasing objects, taking photographs also required a great deal of persuasion on the part of the African members of the expedition. [Fig.12]

Fig. 12

One of the thatched roofs so cherished by Frobenius

(Photography by Leo Frobenius, Ife, December 1910, Frobenius Institute, EBA-Div 00315)

Travel Style

Frobenius took the road from Ibadan to Ife on horseback with his closest companions, spending one night in Ikerre. Here we can learn much about the lodgings of the German travellers:

> One imagines the European travelling in Africa as usually provided with a tent. The familiar green tropical tents with their cooling double walls are as charming as they are practical for travellers, who have no interest in contacts with the natives. But he who wants to get know them better and their way of life, which is so fundamentally different from ours, does well to rest by the hearth after a hard day and live with them under the same roof. [...] Moreover, the native's huts are perfectly liveable. The uncivilized among them, at least there where Europe's graciousness is not yet known, are quite respectable hosts [...] all civilized conveniences such as cot with mosquito net, table, chair and the like can be conveniently put in them [the houses]. The vermin is not to speak of when compared to southern European conditions. (Arriens 1928: 28)

The travel equipment consisted of a tropical travel cot with a mosquito net, a wash and bathtub made of waterproof cloth, table and chairs, everything collapsible. It was camping in high style. During travel periods, the day began early, while it was still dark, with hot chicken broth. With the help of the boys, the bed and chairs were folded into manageable packages to be shouldered by the porters. The morning was spent on the march, usually until noon, at which time camp was again made. The differences between black and white were most apparent in the food. For the white masters, the cook prepared and served the food according to European standards. Canned butter, meat conserves and flour were delivered regularly from Lagos, as were boxes of cigars, whiskey and absinthe, to sweeten the day and for easing relations with local officials of the colonial administration. Despite such amenities, the rainy season in particular made the lives of the Europeans difficult. They repeatedly suffered from malaria, and on the Cameroonian plateau they were plagued by

pneumonia. Arriens also suffered a severe toothache and Frobenius had to cope with stomach problems that ultimately forced him to return home earlier than planned. In his work on early travellers in the Congo Basin, Johannes Fabian concludes:

> More often than not they too were 'out of their minds' with extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur and feelings ranging from anger to contempt. Much of the time they were in the thralls of 'fever' and other tropical diseases, under the influence of alcohol or opiates [...], high doses of quinine, arsenic and other ingredients from the expedition's medicine chest. (Fabian 2000: 3)

While this conclusion seems somewhat extreme, it nevertheless describes a vital aspect of early travelling in Africa that has little in common with the publicly mediated image of the morally superior, courageous and rational explorer. Frobenius emphasized the modernity and effectiveness of his travel philosophy. He took advantage of the latest infrastructural developments on the continent brought about by the European colonizers. Whenever possible, he travelled by rail, paddle steamer and later by car. He also used the most modern technical documentation equipment available: stereo camera, miniature camera and film. Many of his field notes made their way almost unchanged into subsequent publications. During the expedition itself, he and his staff put great emphasis on the visual documentation of the collected objects but also people, architecture and everyday life, for later use in publications and exhibitions. [Fig.13]

Fig. 13

Camping on the banks of Benue River (Watercolour by Carl Arriens, Middle Benue, probably October 1911)

(Frobenius Institute, EBA-B 02704)

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Conclusion

The quality of the collected objects was much cherished by the museums. Nevertheless, the collection activities primarily served the purpose of financing the expedition. The documentation of the handicraft, architecture, ancient traditions, legends and languages, all

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that was "old warm-blooded Africa", the immanent disappearance of which he feared most ("Das sterbende Afrika" – the dying Africa), was more important to Frobenius. He never thought about – or at least never wrote about – the fact that he himself was contributing to the cultural decline of whole regions by buying up the best pieces. When compared with a brilliant individualist traveller such as Heinrich Barth, who travelled Africa a half-century earlier, an assessment of Frobenius' travels can only result in ambivalence, especially considering his travel technique. Travelling in a caravan allowed him to collect huge amounts of ethnographic and historical data that is today highly valuable source material. Apart from the material objects, this particularly includes the earliest versions of many oral traditions and folk tales and more than 3,000 pencil and ink drawings, aquarelles and photographs from an otherwise remarkably imageless time. On the other hand, this form of travel and the frequent changes of location left little time for acquiring a deeper understanding of the country and the people.

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[1] A previous version of this article has been published in the exhibition catalogue "Nigeria 100 Years Ago. Through the eyes of Leo Frobenius and his Expedition Team", edited by Richard Kuba and Musa Hambolu. Frankfurt am Main, National Commission for Museums and Monuments Nigeria and Frobenius Institute, 2010, pp. 43-54.

[2] Namely, from the following ethnic groups: Yoruba, Hausa (Kano, Sokoto, Zinder), Nupe, Jukun, Tiv, Chamba, Daka, Mundang, Laka, Baja, Bokko-Nandji, Dii, Bom, Mulgoi- Kanuri, Borgu, Karekare, Dakakari and Kamberi (Frobenius 1922; 1923; 1924; 1926 and 1927).