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Frobenius’ Culture History in Australia: Dead Ends and New Insights

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> Cet article fait partie d’une série de six articles initialement présentés dans le cadre du panel « Historicizing Anachronistic Motives » qui s’est tenu lors de la première conférence internationale des histoires des anthropologies « Doing Histories, Imagining Futures « (4-7 décembre 2023, en ligne) co-organisée par le History of Anthropology Network de l’EASA et l’Università di Pisa avec le soutien de Bérose et de dix autres acteurs institutionnels dans le domaine de l’histoire de l’anthropologie. Le panel a été organisé par David Shankland (Royal Anthropological Institute ; University College London, Royaume-Uni), Christine Laurière (CNRS / UMR9022 Héritages, France) et Frederico Delgado Rosa (Universidade Nova de Lisboa, CRIA Centre for Research in Anthropology, Portugal).

The Encounter

Over ten years ago, in 2014, on a cold January day, an Australian delegation visited the Frobenius Institute for Research in Cultural Anthropology at the Goethe University in Frankfurt, Germany. Mikailo McKenzie and Gordon Junior, Ngarinyin traditional owners from the Kimberley in Northwest Australia, boarded a plane for the first time, together with art historian Heather Winter, in order to take a look at a treasure in Frankfurt: This consisted of around 2,400 photographs and 150 copies of rock paintings. [1]

Compiled in 1938 by the participants of the institute’s 22nd expedition, the existence of this archive almost fell into obscurity for a whole generation. In distant Germany, pictures and stories from a time extremely lacking in images were preserved as if in a time capsule: portraits of long-deceased grandfathers and great grandmothers; rock paintings that many Ngarinyin living today only know from stories; along with cultural records from the days when the Ngarinyin and their related Indigenous groups, the Woddordda and Wunambal, still lived on their ancestral lands and could cultivate their very special relationship to their country, with all its myths and rituals, more intensely.

One year later, in 2015, a further delegation announced their arrival, this time from the Woddordda. It was at this point that we realised that we were in possession of a very special archive and that it needed to be thoroughly researched. The question of who could have access to the material, and which cultural protocols had to be observed, was in urgent need of clarification. Finally, quite a few of the photos showed highly secret ceremonies which were under no circumstances to be seen (for their own protection) by uninitiated eyes. To this day, the rock paintings still "belong" to very specific families; only they can grant access and are allowed to artistically process the motifs.

This was the beginning of a collaborative research undertaking, [2] during the course of which, together with our Australian partners, we tracked down lost archives across Germany, deciphered barely legible handwriting and translated it into English, and repatriated pictures, both physically and digitally. Finally, we gazed in wonder at the ancient originals at the hidden rock painting sites in the Kimberley, and compared the different pools of knowledge: that around eighty years old from the world of paper, and that retold from generation to generation within the local families.

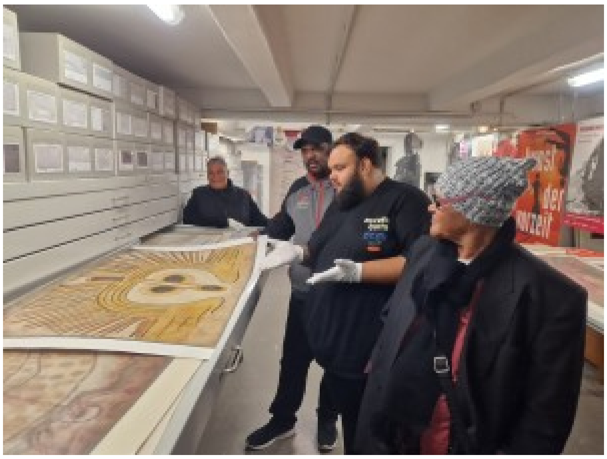

Fig. 1

Traditional owners at the Frobenius Institute's rock art archive, Frankfurt/Main, November 2023 (left to right: Leah Umbagai, Lloyd Nulgit, Pete O'Connor and Rona Charles)

The Backstory

But how did it come about that German researchers set out for the Kimberley shortly before the outbreak of World War II? And what makes the material they collected so special?

Here it is worth taking a look at the history of the institute that sent the researchers, which at the time went under the name Forschungsinstitut für Kulturmorphologie (Institute for Cultural Morphology). Now named after its founder, German ethnologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938), it is arguably the oldest German-speaking research institute in the field of cultural anthropology, whose beginnings stretch back to the end of the nineteenth century.

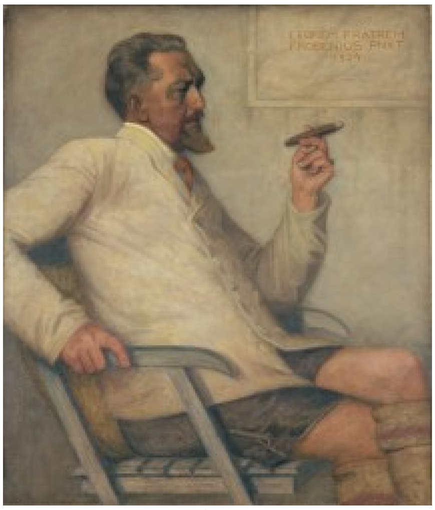

Fig. 2

Portrait of Leo Frobenius 1924, painted by his brother
Hermann Frobenius (1871–1954). Oil on canvas.
© Frobenius Institute

Admittedly Frobenius's interest was Africa, and he described himself as the first trained ethnologist to conduct field research in Africa (Frobenius 1925: 26). Time was crucial: "At the speed at which African culture, under the influence of European economic life, is now being destroyed, it is necessary to quickly and systematically explore its full extent". His first African expedition in 1904 took him to what was then Belgian Congo, and up until the outbreak of World War I, he travelled almost uninterruptedly throughout West and North Africa. Driven by the "threat that peoples and entire cultural groups will melt under the heat of the European will to power", he saw "cultures rushing towards destruction" everywhere (Frobenius 1925: 21, 26).

Consequently, he felt the urgent need for a form of salvage ethnography. For Frobenius, the collection of ethnographic objects was more of a means to finance the expensive expeditions, for which the researcher regularly hired painters and draughtsmen for the visual documentation of "dying Africa" (Frobenius 1923). This resulted in an enormous archive of fairy tales and myths, architecture and handicraft, masks, traditional costumes and cults. The older, the more valuable.

The year 1912 marked a turning point when Frobenius was granted an audience with the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II. This led to a lifelong friendship between the two men (Franzen, Kohl and Recker 2012), resulting, amongst other things, in access to new sources of finance, removing Frobenius's reliance on collecting for German ethnological museums.

From then on, he could concentrate on the oldest and most primordial manifestation of African cultures, the prehistoric rock pictures. In his eyes, the key to European Ice Age art was to be found in Africa. It was here that the tradition lived on after the Ice Age, and that one could also find the myths that explain them (Kuba and Porr 2022). In 1913 he set off on his sixth "German Inner-African Research Expedition" to Algeria, together with three painters. Purely photographic documentation was out of the question as "a drawing produced in a living process is in many cases more ‘quintessential’ than a mechanical photograph” (Frobenius 1937: 21). In the craggy mountains of the Saharan Atlas, the artists submitted the prehistoric carvings – including the rocky background, the cracks, erosions and defects – to canvas as accurately as possible, in monumental life-size pictures of up to ten metres in width. This established a completely new, previously unrivalled standard of rock art documentation.

Only weeks before the outbreak of World War I, the expedition returned with some 320 copies of rock pictures. It was the foundation for the world largest collection of rock art copies. During and after the war, expeditions were conducted to Eritrea and Egypt. However, the largest addition to the collection was made by the ninth expedition (1928–30), which documented Southern Africa’s extremely rich rock art tradition. For the first time, in addition to three ethnologists and a painter, Frobenius was also accompanied by three women painters, Elisabeth Mannsfeld (1891–1971), Maria Weyersberg (1886–1987) and Agnes Schulz (1892–1973).

From then on Frobenius almost exclusively employed trained women artists for the copying of the rock pictures. He praised the “heroic services of the delicate natures”, who in weeks-long work “[…] continually exposed to wind and rain, and often cut off from the rest of humanity for just as long, mastered such huge works” (Frobenius 1930: 84). Furthermore “over the course of the years they had learnt […], to convey the *spirituality* that gave rise to the works” (Frobenius 1937: 21).

In the 1920s and 1930s, a total of nearly two dozen men and women painters were employed at Frobenius’s institute. While the male artists in particular continued their careers after leaving the institute, the women painters appear to have had a stronger identification with the institute and its charismatic director. Many of them were well-brought-up young ladies from bourgeois families. The unpublished diary of one of these women painters, Elisabeth “Katta” Krebs, not only bears witness to her sense of wonder at the fantastic play of light and shadow, colours and forms of the Saharan landscapes, but also tells of a wild and free life beyond the constraints of bourgeois society. The work at the Frankfurt institute promised variety, travel and adventure, and opened up completely new possibilities, especially for young women. As scientists or draughtswomen they had a strong position at the institute – to a great extent with equal rights – which was also given the title “little Amazon state” (Beer 2006; Stappert 2019). At least seven painters married members of the institute and thus also remained connected to it in this way. Painters such as Agnes Schulz, Maria Weyersberg and Elisabeth Pauli were amongst the most experienced women expedition members, who from the middle of the 1930s also led expeditions to regions with European rock pictures – in France, Scandinavia, Spain and Italy – and also produced their own scientific publications.

From the mid-1930s onwards, the research focus extended beyond Africa. Prior to this, Frobenius had completed his last Africa expedition in the eastern Sahara. He summarised the character of the expedition as follows: “Discipline amidst the greatest poverty, clarity of tasks, joy in life, happiness i.e. success” (Frobenius 1937: vii). Sandstorms, injuries and car breakdowns, but also the gruff Prussian manner of the director, who was miserly with the food rations and for whom “an expedition is no life insurance” took him, as well as his assistants, to the limit of their capabilities. Frobenius marketed the great Sahara expedition as his 12th and last expedition, “the scheduled completion of the exploration of the African continent” (Frobenius 1937: vii). In fact, Frobenius, now sixty years old, and whose health had become increasingly fragile over the preceding years, was concerned to hand over responsibility for future expeditions to the assistants who had trained under him.

Over the course of thirty years and a total of 12 Deutsche Inner-Afrika Forschungs-Expeditionen (German Inner African Research Expeditions) Frobenius had acquired considerable know-how in the organisation and conduction of expeditions, had developed documentation standards and increasingly placed the *Weltanschauung*, in particular as expressed in mythology and art, at the centre of his research interests.

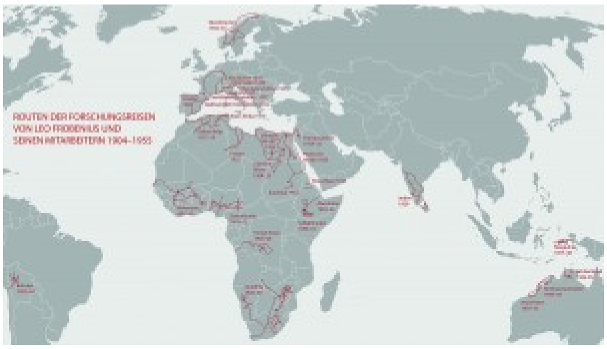

Fig. 3

Research trips by Leo Frobenius and his staff
1904-1955.

At the same time, he had established his personal idea of how foreign cultures are to be understood amongst his students. It was about “turning off one’s own attitude and mentality to the extent that what is observed can become alive within us” (Frobenius 1929: 272). Frobenius, who was also guilty of racist statements which were typical for the time, repeatedly complained of the prejudices and blindness of Europeans. On the other hand, he claimed an openness which allowed him – so he believed – to overcome his own projections and to apprehend the reality beyond ethnocentric subjectivity. Only so could the European gaze – shaped by rationalism and utilitarianism, and which merely saw foreign cultures as “curiosity cabinets” – be overcome so that these cultures could now serve as “our teachers” (Frobenius 1932: 68).

Thus, the reality behind the facts tends to reveal itself to the sensitive artist as opposed to the rationally thinking scientist:

“Only they who are genuinely musical or really a lover of art […] can have an idea of the sublime grand nature which finds immediate expression in the Ethiopians’ language of customs, and the crudeness we must apply […] in order to take measure of the fathomless richness of feeling with the millimetre-by-millimetre acquisition of our rational judgement. (Frobenius 1929: 239)”

Thus, the ground had been laid for a new generation to continue the work. However, this required expanding the radius of action of his privately-run institute that repeatedly faced the threat of financial ruin. The formula that he found for this in the mid-1930s was “Deutsche Umwelt” (German environment), abbreviated to DU, the equivalent to “you” in German, [3] which can also be understood as a concession to the zeitgeist of the new political situation in the country (Kuba 2024).

While mainstream ethnology largely integrated itself into the National Socialist system both institutionally and in terms of content and personnel, (Streck 2000: 9; Gingrich 2005: 123), Frobenius’s cultural morphology tended to remain on the periphery. Frobenius actually entertained great hopes on Hitler’s assumption of office, and he was in a very comfortable position in the mid-1930s: despite the growing ideological opposition of more committed Nazi functionaries, he was able to secure enough funds for his institute, enabling him to organise his last Africa expedition and send his assistants to regions with European rock art. Clearly one can argue that Frobenius’s penchant for intuition, irrationalism, mysticism and his rejection of positivist rationalism associated with “the West” (Marchand 1997) emerged from (and flowed into) a zeitgeist in the period after World War I, which also nourished the early Nazi ideology (Streck 2014: 164-69). However, his refusal to include race as a factor in his cultural theory increasingly strained relations with the regime. Thanks to the support of a network of friends within the Nazi hierarchy and the protection afforded by his popularity, together with the fact that he was not perceived as a threat to the regime, he was never seriously endangered in the period before his death in August 1938. However, without the popular figure at its head, the “politically highly suspect” institute would increasingly navigate troubled waters (Geisenhainer 2005: 381).

To Australia

The inspiration for an expedition to Australia can be traced to the German missionary and ethnologist Carl Strehlow (1871–1922), who published a five-volume work on the central Australian Arernte and Luritja people (Strehlow 1907–1920). Frobenius put out the first feelers in the direction of Australia and Oceania as early as 1933, when, in a short foreword to the adventure book *Kolun-Neuguinea. Drei Männer suchen Gold*, he wrote of his “longing for a journey to the Oceanian tropics together with the author” (Beinssen 1933). Shortly after and with the help of the author, the German-Australian Ekkehard Beinssen (1899–1980), Frobenius established initial contacts with Australia and tried even to found an outpost of the institute in Sydney (Beinssen-Hesse 2004: 158) Although this scheme, as well as the hope of mobilising Australian funding for a research expedition, did not come off, Frobenius stuck to his plans and in the last year of his life not only sent his assistants on an expedition to Seram and West Papua (1937–38) but also to the Kimberly in northwest Australia.

This remote region of Australia was chosen, amongst other reasons, because it was home to “tribes who have been little affected by white civilisation”, as noted by an Australian newspaper reporting on the arrival of the German team. [4] The goal of the expedition was to "learn [something] of the material and spiritual cultures of the people of the Kimberley plateau in the past and present". [5] The expedition was largely financed by the "Advertising Council of German Industry under the authorisation of the Ministry for Propaganda and the City of Frankfurt in the person of the Lord Mayor Krebs'. A total of 1,140 Australian pounds, i.e. 10,000 Reichsmark, could be raised from "Berlin sources". [6]

In preparation, a research permit had to be obtained, which was acquired in the name of the Städtische Völkermuseum, of which Frobenius became the director in 1935. For the Australian authorities, it was henceforth known as the expedition of the Frankfurt "Peoples Museum". On 30 August 1937 the long-awaited permit finally arrived, signed by the chief protector of Aborigines in Western Australia, Auber O. Neville (1875–1954), who was later known as "Neville the devil" for his racist politics and his responsibility for the "Stolen Generation". The conditions were listed as follows:

"1) refrain from unduly interfering with or molesting the native peoples to be found on the native reserves;
2) abstain from obtaining or removing any ethnological specimens from such reserves [...] probably a limited number of cultural objects, weapons, etc. might be acquired [...];
3) refrain from taking photographs on native reserves, such being prohibited [...] permission may be granted on condition that a print of every photograph taken on an native reserve is supplied to the Department. [7]"

Special negotiations were required for the institute's request to take the two female members of the expedition to the "native reserve", as well as the wish to bring hunting rifles into the country for the purpose of hunting for food. Ultimately, both requests were approved and after a six-week sea voyage the five expedition members arrived in Perth in Western Australia at the beginning of March 1938. The German party was led by the thirty-year-old ethnologist Helmut Petri (1907–1986), known to everyone as Petrus, who had been working at the institute in Frankfurt since 1935. He was assisted by the German-American Douglas C. Fox (1906–1979), journalist, adventurer and bon vivant. He had already participated in numerous Frobenius expeditions as driver, logistician and photographer, and in 1937 organised the institute's celebrated rock art exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. The ethnologist Andreas Lommel (1912–2005), who had just received his doctorate, also joined the party at short notice. While the male members of the expedition focused on ethnographic and prehistoric studies, the two women artists were responsible for the visual documentation, in particular the copying of the rock paintings. Agnes Susanne Schulz (1892–1973) known as "Asuschu", and sometimes also as the "Signora", was one of the institute's most experienced artists and already had ten years' experience copying rock pictures in southern Africa, the Libyan Sahara, Scandinavia and Northern Italy. As the oldest she was highly respected, especially by the expedition leader Petri: "Schu made him so nervous". [8] Furthermore, she was clearly also responsible for the finances. [9] Her younger artist colleague was Gerta Kleist (1911–1998), alias "Kleiklei", who, following a short documentation trip to northern Italy, now embarked on her first major expedition outside

Europe. Although less experienced, she was more meticulous in noting down the names of the Aboriginal individuals she portrayed.

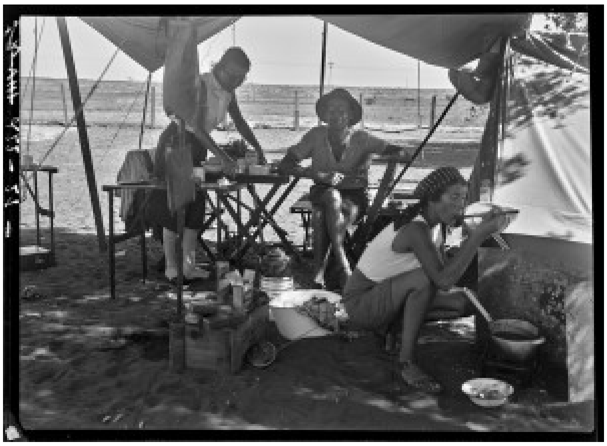

Fig. 4

Agnes Schulz, Gerta Kleist and Andreas Lommel in the camp near Port Headland in April 1938.

Collection: Frobenius Institute. [FoA 22-0021)

In the Kimberley

In Perth the Australian psychology student, Patrick Pentony, [10] joined the party with the intention of researching the dreams of the Aborigines for his bachelor's thesis (Pentony 1938). The first leg of the journey was by liner to Broome, located further north, the centre of pearl fishing, and from there three days travel on a small schooner in the direction of Walcott Inlet and the Government Aboriginal Station Munja. This was one of the "feeding stations" where, amongst other things, the Aboriginal people received food rations in order to keep them off the land of the cattle breeders and prevent them from spearing the cows. This was preceded by huge land theft and the often-violent displacement of the Indigenous population from their ancestral land (Owens 2016, Jebb 2002). Munja, as well as the mission and trading stations subsequently visited further north, represented the expedition's essential logistical nodal points in an otherwise sparsely populated landscape almost devoid of tracks. Here one could hire mounts and pack animals (horses, donkeys, mules or camels), replenish provisions, send post and organise longer trips to the rock art sites or camps of the local population. These stations were run by white Australians, who, mostly together with their families, lived largely isolated in the outback over many years, and were sometimes extremely welcoming, but sometimes also suspicious or even dismissive of the Germans.

In Munja, the station director Harold Reid belonged to the second category and initially refused the travellers transport horses. However, more importantly, the team was assigned two Aboriginal men who lived on the station named Paddy and Leggings. "The first more-or-less speaks English and can also be used as an interpreter, the latter hardly speaks English but is the more intelligent and also knows a great deal about his own people". [11] Stone arrangements and "native camps" were visited in the surroundings, as well as the first rock painting sites which were copied by the two women artists.

In the following months the expedition members repeatedly divided up into smaller groups with different destinations. The women artists camped at especially rich rock painting sites, sometimes for weeks, accompanied by an Aboriginal guide and one of the male expedition members as “Lord Protector of ladies in the painter camp”. [12]

In September the women, together with Lommel, set off by boat to the isolated Presbyterian Mission Station Kunmunya to the north, with Petri and Fox travelling over land. The relationship to Reverend J.R.B Love (1889–1947), who had already been running the station for over ten years, proved to be extremely difficult. Love not only spoke the local Woddordda language, but in 1936 had also published an ethnographic study of the Woddordda, *Stone-Age Bushmen of Today*. From the beginning, the reverend was sceptical of the possibilities of the German researchers, and even before the start of the exhibition wrote to Petri:

"I do not think you will get a working knowledge of any native language under three months' continuous work and association. This is the only thing that will make your work of real value, and, is, I should say, essential. Three months will not, I fear, enable you to discuss matters of belief with the aborigines. This could only be done after long years of association. [13]“The visit to the isolated mission station also proved to be equally complicated. As Petri noted in his report:”It has to be admitted that Mr. Love made an honest attempt to play the friendly host. However, as he is by nature stiff and a Presbyterian clergyman, and as he sees himself as dictator of the Kimberleys in general and personal owner of Kunmunya in particular, it is not easy to strike a freer conversational tone with him. This applies above all to the scientific field. He considers the Worora to be his personal reserve and he is not particularly happy about our presence in this country. [14]"

Petri traces this back to a deep-rooted hatred of the Germans on the part of this former ANZAC [15] combatant: “He saw in us, under the pretext of ethnographic work, people on the lookout for a new colony for Germany. The fear of spies is a very widespread illness in Australia”. [16] By way of confirmation, there is a confidential letter in the Australian State Records from a “Flying Doctor” who met the expedition members in Kunmunya, and addressed his concerns to the Australian Ministry of the Interior:

"While there we met a party of three Germans, self-styled anthropologists, two women and a man. The man is a German army officer with army equipment and the women are very poor exponents of their supposed jobs. Also, wherever they go, trouble amongst the natives has followed. I think the Commonwealth Defence Department should investigate these customers more fully. [17]“Admittedly, the reverend’s fundamental opposition to the collection of ethnographic objects, which Petri could somewhat understand, was more important:”In his opinion it represents a debasement of the native culture when one trades tobacco for the black’s cultural property. Perhaps there is a certain justification in this standpoint. However, as we want to acquire a nice collection for our museum, I can’t currently occupy myself with such lines of thought [18]."

The women artists were especially disappointed that Reverend Love did not allow the rock art sites to be visited, or even copied, “with reference to the feelings of the natives which were to be respected, and who would be insulted by the presence of women at such places”. [19] After a week in Kunmunya, they moved on to a camp three days travel away and quickly set about making copies of the Jandara rock picture site, which, amongst other things, features a large crocodile (see Fig. 4). Here the proximity of the women to the rock paintings did not always prove to be in conformity with the cultural values of the Indigenous population, and was also punished – albeit only indirectly. Agnes Schultz wrote in her diary: “On the evening before the decampment, Klei-Klei scalded her foot. The natives said that she had been bitten by the crocodile because he didn’t allow people to get so close to it, as we did when copying”. [20]

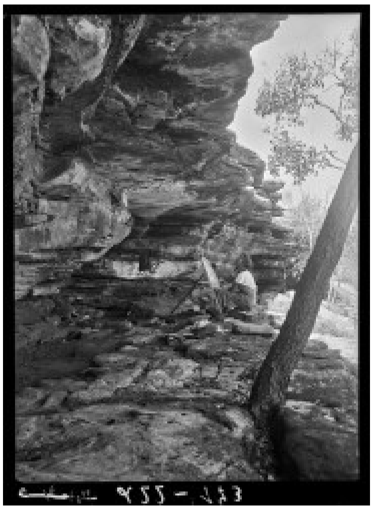

Fig. 5

Gerta Kleist in November 1938 while copying the large crocodile, Jandara, North Kimberley.

Collection: Frobenius Institute. [FoA 22-0173]

However, Schulz’s enthusiasm at the discovery of ever new rock paintings was not dampened by her colleague’s mishap. She traced her receptiveness to them back to her teacher: “One often has the strong feeling that the immediate impressions of vivid reality are unique and irreplaceable, insofar as one is receptive and open to them – for which, in this respect, we have Frobenius to thank!” [21] Fox also sees himself as beholden to the institute’s director: “As students of Frobenius we know only too well how the individual, spiritually and physically, is dependent on and influenced by the landscape; we know how closely spirit and environment are linked”. [22]

Consequently, the expedition members were appropriately dejected when the news of Frobenius’s death reached them in August 1938:

"The good mood was gone and the next days, which were filled with the preparations for our return to Munya and the onward journey to Drysdale, were very subdued. We decided to complete the expedition as the director had intended and planned it, but above all to comply with the instructions that we would receive from the institute. [23]"

Two Researchers

Towards the end of the year the women returned to Perth, where, in January 1939, they exhibited their portraits and copies of the rock paintings in the hall of the Western Australian Museum housing the casts of antique statues (see Fig. 5). All of the German expedition members soon returned to their homeland with rich scientific spoils: around 2,400 photos; a total of 260 copies of rock paintings, landscape scenes and portraits, mainly watercolours; and hundreds of collected objects, as well as audio recordings, reports, field notes and diaries. Shortly before the outbreak of World War II, an exhibition was held at the Städtische Völkermuseum in Frankfurt, and soon after Lommel and Petri were conscripted into the army. They both survived the war and imprisonment as POW.

Following the war Petri, Lommel and Schulz made further research trips to Australia. Schulz undertook a solo journey to the Arnhem Land in northern Australia, where, now sixty-two years old, she copied rock paintings, isolated in the bush for months. In a diary entry from 1954 she wrote of the Kimberley: “One can no longer pursue the undertakings that were possible for us in 1938. No one lives beyond the Leopold Ranges any more, and only very few natives”. [24] However, in 1954–55 Lommel returned to the Kimberley for five months together with his wife, the former painter from the institute in Frankfurt, Katharina Marr. On the Gibb River cattle farm his wife produced huge, impressive copies of rock paintings. It would be Lommel’s last field research. In contrast, Petri remained faithful to research and together with his wife, the ethnologist Gisela Petri-Odermann, undertook numerous further journeys to Western Australia through to the 1980s. However, they now concentrated on La Grange Mission (Bidyadanga) and Anna Plains Station in the southern Kimberley.

It was not until the 1950s that Lommel and Petri had the opportunity to process their 1938 material and each publish an ethnographic study. The majority of the objects collected had been lost during the bombing of Frankfurt in 1944, as well as Petri’s notes on the mythology and apparently around 360 metres of film material. While in the field, the two ethnologists had selected different groups from the Kimberley as the focus of their research. Petri had chosen the Ngarinyin and Lommel the Wunambal, who lived further north. The resulting volumes reflected diverging approaches that dated back to the 1938 expedition, during which Petri complained of his younger colleague in the following terms: “It would have been appropriate if he had also written to me about his research [...], however, it is a recurring theme that Lommel doesn’t believe that he need occupy himself with such things, and as before I don’t know what he is actually doing”. [25] In the coming decades they would continue to take completely different paths.

Andreas Lommel was the first to publish. In his slim volume *Die Unambal: ein Stamm in Nordwest-Australien* (1952), he gave expression to his extremely pessimistic view of the cultural survival of the society he examined. Later in the same year, Helmut Petri’s voluminous post-doctoral thesis *Der Australische Medizinmann* (The Australian medicin man, Petri 1952–53) appeared and two years later *Sterbende Welt in Nordwest-Australien* (The Northwestern Australia dying world, Petri 1954) was released. While in the latter title it is possible to discern a similarly pessimistic view (which surely echoed Frobenius's), both works displayed significant differences in comparison with Lommel's as Petri had a strong commitment to the well-being of Aboriginal groups and the promotion of their survival. He not only addresses the issue of disappearing customs, but also shows the vitality of the Aboriginal cultures undergoing change.

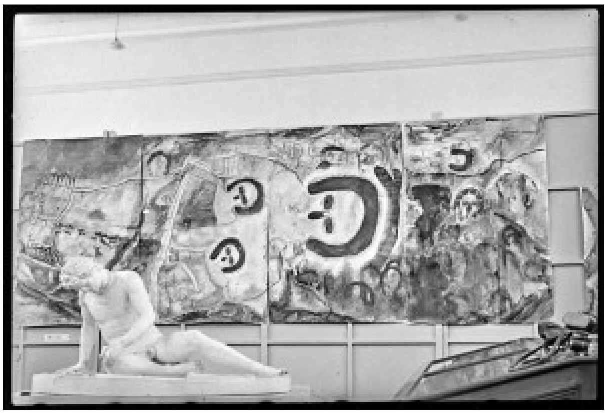

Fig. 6

Copy of the Modum rock painting by Gerta Kleist and Agnes Schulz in the hall of the Western Australian Museum housing the casts of antique statues, January 1939.

Collection: Frobenius Institute. [FoA 22-KB29-31].

Furthermore, the scientific standards of the two men differ. Lommel does not refer to relevant secondary sources. Neither does he refer to Petri, with whom he must have had the opportunity for detailed discussions. Also, he does not give us any insights into the process of information gathering. In contrast, Petri is well versed in the secondary literature and refers to it in his argumentation. He also states that he discussed with Lommel and exchanged notes. Wherever relevant, we learn who his informants were and to what extent their information converged. The problems that the researcher was confronted with, and his relationship to the Indigenous people, are also described so that we can form an opinion of the quality of his research. Here, without doubt, Petri shows himself to be the more mature field researcher and scientist (Beinssen-Hesse 1991: 140; Kolig 2017: 390).

Ultimately, the two men represent completely different approaches. Andreas Lommel, who was appointed the director of the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde in Munich (today: Museum Fünf Kontinente) in 1957, increasingly concentrated on making richly illustrated books on the art of the Indigenous Australians accessible to a broader public. Unfortunately, these books are marred by idiosyncratic and judgemental comments and an almost complete dependence on the short field research trips conducted in the thirties and fifties. His concern was to present the indigenous art to the German public as an aesthetic curiosity: evidence of a culture which was irrevocably condemned to extinction, and therefore, in its contemporary, living manifestations, was not worthy of attention. Lommel's 1969 work *Fortschritt ins Nichts: die Modernisierung der Primitiven Australiens. Beschreibung und Definition eines psychischen Verfalls* (Progress into nothingness: the modernisation of Australia's primitives. Description and definition of a psychological decline, Lommel 1969) played an important role in this. This publication decisively shaped the German perspective on Australia's Indigenous population. In contrast, Petri became a professor at the University of Cologne and continued to conduct scientific research in Western Australia until his accidental death in 1986. In his review of the book from his former "junior research assistant", Petri commented sarcastically: "From an ethnological perspective [the study] really proves to be a 'progress into nothingness'. One forgives the great researcher's [Lommel's] former 'companion' these unfriendly words" (Petri 1970: 236).

Epilogue

The 1938 expedition represents one of the earliest comprehensive scientific studies of the Wanjina-Wunggurr cultures. The Kimberley was chosen because it was thought that its Aboriginal population would be largely untouched by external cultural influences. However, ceremonies Lommel observed in 1938 were already deeply saturated with symbols of European power and technology. Quite similar to Frobenius's view on rapidly vanishing African cultures, he saw this cultural appropriation as impending disaster looming over this particular lifeworld. While Petri certainly had a more nuanced vision on the historicity of "traditional" cultures and there is much to say about the more collaborative ways he related to people in the field, both were influenced by an essentialising vison of culture with its emphasis on beginnings and origins. This vision focused more on myth, beliefs, religion and the arts and crafts as transporting the "cultural soul" of a people, putting less emphasis on kinship or economic systems.

Some ninety years later, the archive is shared with the Wanjina-Wunggur people represented by three Aboriginal corporations, the Wilinggin, Dambimangari and the Wunambal-Gambeera ACs. In a three-year project initiated by traditional owners the written archival material has been transcribed, translated and made available through a database together with the visual and audio material. While more precise genealogical information is sometimes sorely lacking, it turns out that the comprehensive visual documentation is particularly interesting for our partners.

Depicted individuals can be identified and linked to certain families and the rock art copies revive memories of sites which only a few may have seen in their lifetime, as access to their remote location is extremely difficult in our days.

Today, rock art is still seen as a central feature of the local culture and belief system. Furthermore, the emphasis the 1938–39 expedition put on the *Lalai* ("dreamtime") stories related to the rock art sites meets the ongoing strong spiritual connection by the Wanjina-Wunggur people to the spiritual beings depicted (or rather – in an emic view – which manifested themselves) on rocks all across the Kimberley.

Different ontologies, the one from the "whitefellas", fixed on paper ninety years ago and the one transmitted orally (or recently published by traditional owners) seem to complement each other in a creative way. Bringing back and sharing this kind of archive meets the promise that reconnection with culture and country can be part of a healing process and that tradition needs to be passed on to the younger Wanjina-Wunggur generation. There is an ideal that correct, "proper" culture should be transmitted without, however, publishing secret/sacred features.

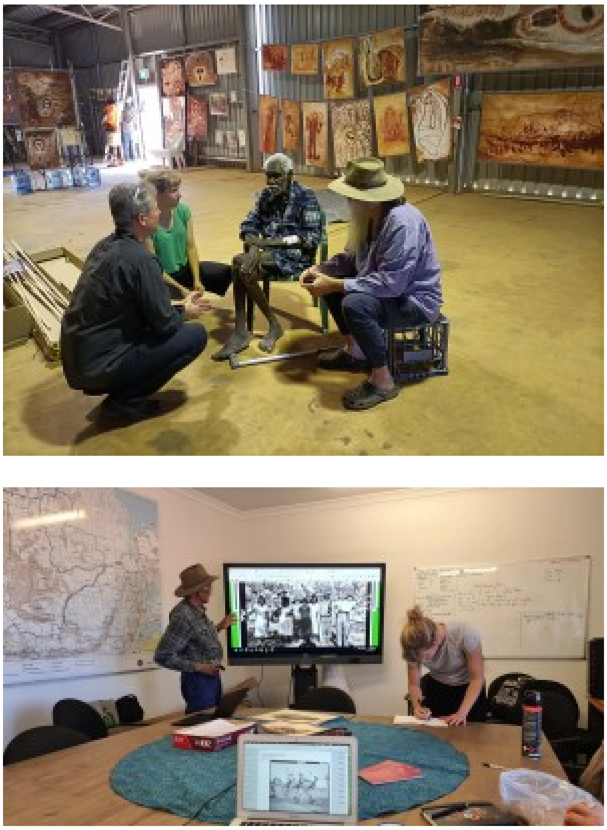

Fig. 7 & 8

Presentation of rock art copies and archival database
at the Wilinggin Aboriginal Corporation in Derby, 2022
(Photos: Martin Porr, Kim Doohan).

Permission: WAC

While Frobenius's distinct anthropological approach, characterised by the "ethnographic expedition" and an idiosyncratic emphasis on "culture", continued to influence his collaborators and successors for a few decades after his death, German anthropology after World War II progressively integrated into the broader framework of mainstream international anthropology. In fact, even before, from the 1930s onwards, the gap between Frobenius's approach and international trends in anthropology was perceptible. Never fully coincident with any of the diffusionist schools, his anthropology clearly contrasted, albeit in different ways, with both British functionalism and American culturalism. This contrast would only grow, reinforcing the "maverick" – or, for that matter, anachronistic – aspect of his endeavours. In short, the very singularity of Frobenius's work placed him at odds with other ways of practising ethnography and anthropology that were gaining ground.

From the 1970s and 1980s onwards, Leo Frobenius increasingly came to be regarded as a somewhat problematic figure within the field. However, his extensive archives, particularly the visual collections, have retained their importance. These include approximately 60,000 photographs and 40,000 sketches, watercolours, and rock art copies gathered from across the globe. In recent years, these archives have gained renewed significance and meaning when re-examined through the perspectives and ontologies of individuals from the regions they document. The engagement of our Australian partners, who aim to reclaim the Kimberley material, reinterpret its meanings, and establish cultural protocols for access to it, exemplifies the dynamic second life embedded within anthropological archives.

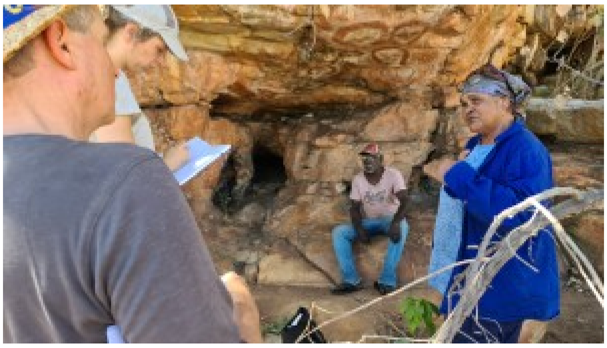

Fig. 9

Joint field work at the Maliba site 2023 (Photo: Martin Porr).

Permission: WAC

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[1] The information concerning the Frobenius Institute collection originally came from Martin Porr, who as

a German archaeologist teaches and researches at the University of Western Australia. Consequently, he was familiar with the largely German publications of the expedition members of the time and was the first person to make contact.

[2] A very special thanks is due to the German Research Association (DFG) who largely financed the research project "The German ethnographic expeditions to the Kimberley in Australia. Their importance for research history, digital repatriation and the joint interpretation of the indigenous cultural heritage" (2020–2024). The University of Western Australia also generously supported the project led by Richard Kuba and Martin Porr. Main partners were the Dambimangari Aboriginal Corporation (AC) and the Wilinggin AC in Derby, the Wunambal-Gaambera AC in Kalumburu and the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt. Some outcomes of the project are displayed in in the collaborative exhibition "County bin pull'em", Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt, November 2024–August 2025: https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/en/exhibitions/

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[12] Ibid., p. 11.

[13] R.J.B. Love, letter to Helmut Petri, 1938 (unpublished archive source), Perth, State Records Western Australia, WA S2030-cons993 1937-39_0208, p. 2.

[14] Helmut Petri, "7. Expeditionsbericht, 14.7.-21.8.38" (unpublished archive source), Frankfurt am Main,

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[15] Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, originally a WWI army corps of the Allied Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces.

[16] Helmut Petri, “8. Expeditionsbericht, Munyastation-Drysdaleriver-Mission, 21.8.-12.9.38” (Unpublished Archive Source), Frankfurt am Main, Archiv des Frobenius-Instituts, HP 013, p. 1.

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