

The Frobenius Reproductions A Collaborative Project

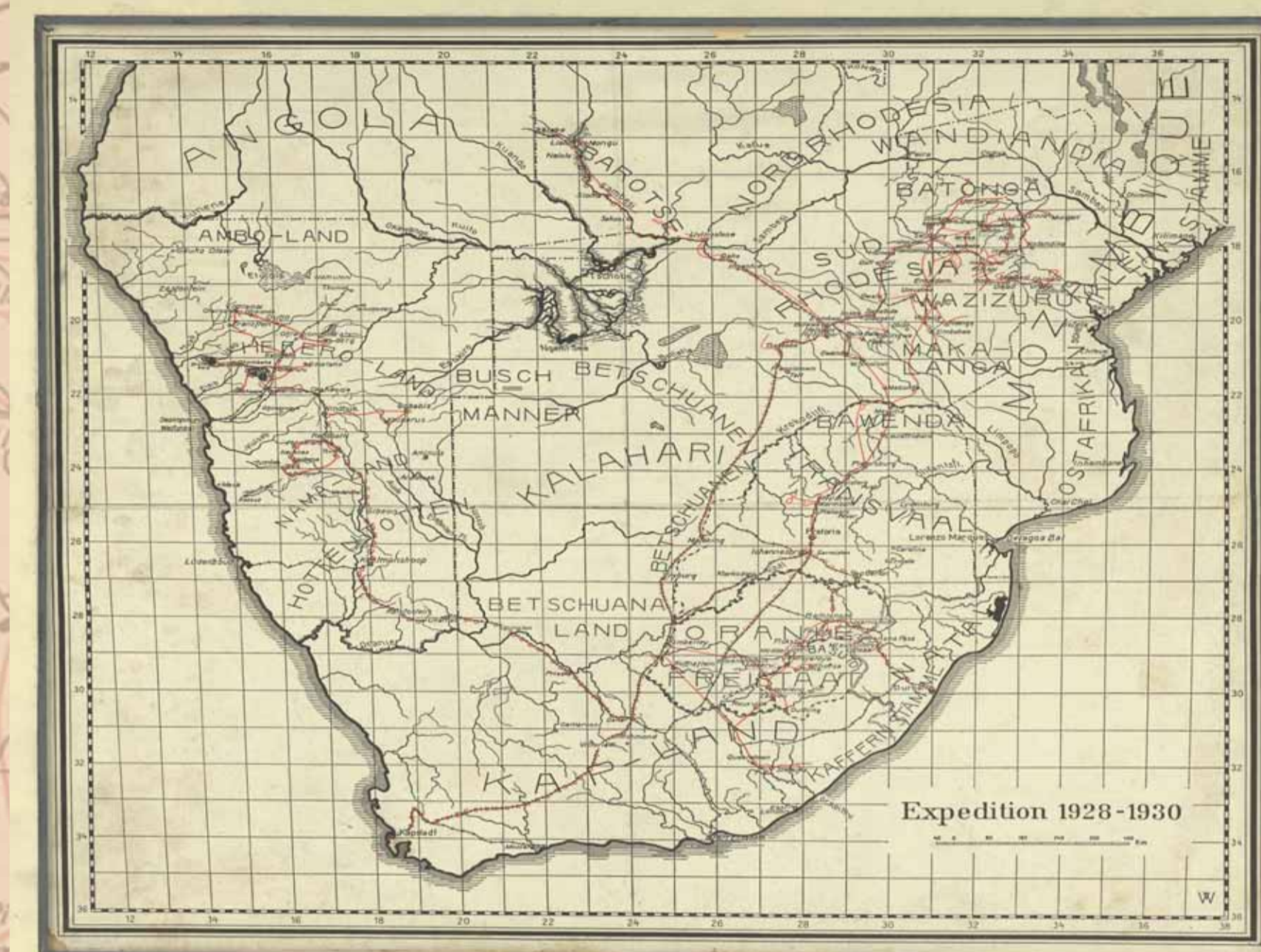
LEO FROBENIUS

Leo Frobenius was rather controversial and one of the most famous and inspiring ethnographers of the early 20th century. Fascinated by the Völkerschauen he witnessed as a young boy and which his grandfather, Heinrich Bodinus, the founder of the Berlin Zoo, organized in the 1870s and 80s, Frobenius' vision of representing African cultures was never entirely free of this exhibitionist tendency. As a contemporary once put it, the man is 25% genius, 50% science and 25% advertising.

Largely an autodidact who did not complete his university education and whose doctoral dissertation was rejected by the University, Frobenius remained an outsider in relation to the academic establishment. The feeling of rejection may explain the incredible zeal and ambition that drove him to undertake twelve long trips to Africa, to create his own research institute and to publish more than 50 books in his lifetime. It was only a few years before his death in 1938 that he was finally able to secure a post as Professor at the University of Frankfurt.

Gifted in matters of public relations, he was able to secure funding for his first expedition to Africa, to the Kongo-Kasai region in 1904. By then he had already initiated his private "Africa-Archive". The name was chosen for a reason. Frobenius was one of the first Europeans to recognize the historicity of African cultures. In his eyes, the cultural achievements of African peoples deserved nothing less than an archive. Frobenius' writings also fascinated the protagonists of the Négritude movement, Leopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire.

His field notes and the graphic documents created by his travelling companions (drawings, watercolours) have been preserved and are kept at the Frobenius Institute in Frankfurt/Main, Germany.



"Map of the expedition's route in southern Africa 1928-30", [Reg.-Nr.: EBA-B 01431]



LEO FROBENIUS

THE EXPEDITION TO SOUTHERN AFRICA 1928-1930

In the expedition Frobenius undertook from 1928 to 1930 in southern Africa he was accompanied by three ethnographers and four artists. They travelled through parts of Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Namibia and South Africa and photographed and painted rock art at various sites. Many of the over 1200 reproductions (paintings copied from rock art) reproduce the rock art in original size in formats therefore up to 10x2 metres. These are exquisite works of art and many were executed in vibrant colours. The artists also made over 400 drawings and paintings of material culture as well as of village scenes and landscapes. Over 3 000 photographs were taken and a 16mm film was produced. Stories, myths and poems from local peoples were also recorded.



"Stopover in Walvischbai, Namibia. Members of the expedition from left to right: Mannsfeld, Weyersberg, Seekirchner, Dr. Jensen, Wieschhoff?, Frobenius" [Reg.-Nr.: FOT 9-10025]

REDISCOVERED

A number of rock art reproductions produced during the expedition had an eventful exhibition history. They were enthusiastically received and exerted great influence in the first half of the 20th century. In the 1930s they were shown in over 40 European and American cities including a spectacular exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937. However in the last decades the collection has largely been forgotten as photographic documentation took over from artistic reproduction of rock art. The rock art paintings and legacies of the Frobenius expeditions are being rediscovered. They are appreciated as works of art in their own right and are also of great historical interest. A fascinating collection of 500 rock art reproductions is housed at Iziko Museums, Cape Town, South Africa. These reproductions, purchased from Leo Frobenius in 1931 by the South African government for a sum of 5 000 pounds are copies of the works of art produced by Frobenius and his team during the 1928 to 1930 expedition. The Iziko collection includes 493 photographs.



Watercolour by Joachim Lutz, 60 x 80 cm, copied on 12 April 1929 at Mtoko cave, Mtoko District, Zimbabwe.
"Part of a much bigger picture, a board with many figures: Hippopotamus, zebras, bucks, man with animal ears. Many men in strong movements" [Reg.-Nr.: FBA-B 00807]



"Great Cinyati cave. Big snake, eland antelopes, figures in red and black, group of white runners with animal ears. 1,90 m long, 1,15 m wide. Watercolor by Agnes Schulz" [SAM-Nr.: FROB 646]



"Mtoko-District. Mtoko cave. Joachim Lutz copying in the cave. Zimbabwe" [Reg.-Nr.: FOT 9-12292]

COLLABORATIVE PROJECT BETWEEN THE FROBENIUS INSTITUTE AND IZIKO MUSEUMS

The aim of this collaborative project is to compare the reproductions and archival material from the 1928 to 1930 expedition to southern Africa held in Iziko Museums with the originals housed at the Frobenius Institute and to assess conservation needs and research potential. The work of Leo Frobenius has largely been ignored in South Africa perhaps as his publications are available only in German. Research on this significant archival resource may revive an interest in Frobenius' work by the South African public and researchers in the fields of anthropology and archaeology. It is anticipated this may offer a new direction in anthropological and rock art research. The venture will honour the work of Frobenius and may culminate in the restoration and conservation of the Frobenius collection. Cooperation between the Frobenius Institute and Iziko Museums has already yielded new insights into the collection's history and is expected to lead to further joint projects.

The Frobenius Institute, Germany's oldest ethnological research Institute affiliated to the University of Frankfurt, is currently running a three-year digitizing project (2006-2009) funded by the German Research Foundation in order 1) to arrange, to describe, to preserve/restore and to adequately store one of the largest ethnographic art archives of the Frobenius Institute, and 2) to make the Archive more accessible to scholarly research by creating a database, online-catalogue and finding aids. Another project aims at editing and publishing the unpublished folktales collected during the expedition. The results of both projects - an online image database and a publication of the folktales are expected to be completed in 2009.

The Iziko Museums has 500 copies in its holdings and has sent its rock art collections to the Rock Art Research Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, for digitization by the South African Rock Art Digital Archive's project (SARADA). This project, funded by the Mellon Foundation, involves the digitization of rock art archives held in institutions and by private individuals around South Africa and abroad, providing an online access of rich resources for scholars, researchers and the public.

A project is currently underway to have the Frobenius' book, *Madsimu Dsangara*, which relates to the expedition of 1928 to 1930, translated into English with the prospect of an exhibition of the Iziko Museum's collection.



One of the 2260 middle format rock art copies in the Frobenius-Institute archive



Digitizing a large format rock art copy in the Frobenius-Institute



A rock art reproduction from Iziko Museum's Frobenius collection

AUTHORS AND AFFILIATIONS

Richard Kuba 1, Petro Keene 2, 3 and Sarah Wurz 2,4

- 1 Frobenius Institute, University of Frankfurt/Main
- 2 Pre-colonial Archaeology, Social History Collections Department, Iziko Museums of Cape Town
- 3 Department of Anthropology and Archaeology, University of South Africa
- 4 Department of Archaeology, University of Cape Town