

Six Decades of Southern Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute

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The Beginnings – Captivated by Southern Ethiopia

The regional focus and interest of the Frobenius Institute on southern Ethiopia was in some ways already initiated by its founder Leo Frobenius, although he died in 1938 without ever travelling to Ethiopia himself. Frobenius was a well-known expert on Africa and founded the institute 1898 on basis of his private collection under the name “Afrika Archiv”. Frobenius was well-connected and amongst others also a friend of Emperor Wilhelm II. His contact to the emperor and nationalist attitude made him to travel to Northeast Africa in 1914 with plans to initiate a revolt against the British in Sudan (Braukämper 1994, Thubauville 2014). He went by the Red Sea and was meant to reach Sudan via Ethiopia, but was uncovered by the Italians in Eritrea and sent back to Europe. Before returning to Europe, he was able to shortly visit Eritrea’s Hamasen region. There he took photographs and drew few sketches of rock engravings that he observed.¹ Unfortunately, this short stay and impression of Eritrea remained his only visit to Northeast Africa. Still, Frobenius kept an interest in the region. In the 1920s the Austrian researcher Friedrich Julius Bieber – who had already made a name for himself as a leading scholar on Ethiopia with his ethnography of the Kaffa – became a corresponding member of the institute. Together with Frobenius he published the volume “Zur Herrlichkeit des Sudans” (Concerning the Glory of Sudan), the edited travel report of a fellow Austrian, Eduard Freiherr von Gallot, who had travelled through Ethiopia in 1831. The two scholars had planned common research expeditions to Northeast Africa together, but unfortunately Bieber died in 1924.

In 1932 Frobenius was appointed Honorary Professor at Frankfurt University and shortly after was additionally engaged as director of the ethnographic museum. Frobenius was therefore, busy with his tasks in Frankfurt. The institute’s focus covered not only ethnography but also prehistory. This is why the researchers were heavily inspired by descriptions of the French archaeologists Azaïs and Chambard of the large number of monoliths to be found in southern Ethiopia (Azaïs and Chambard 1931). Frobenius decided on an expedition to Ethiopia and hand over the directorship of it to Jensen, one of his assistants. Jensen had won Frobenius’ trust in the course of two expeditions to South Africa and Libya. He left Frankfurt for Ethiopia in October 1934, accompanied by fellow researchers and a painter. Stirred by the French researchers’ discovery of prehistoric stele, they seemed to have been preoccupied with the thought of similar discoveries. They travelled south along the lakes of the Rift Valley and on a small hill, Tutto Fela, in the Gedeo area, they finally found what they were searching for, around one hundred phallus-shaped stone steles with incised faces and geometrical patterns (Thubauville 2012 a and b).

1 Rock art was one of the main research interests of Frobenius (Kuba 2017).



Fig 1: Stone stela at Tutto Fela, 1935

The southernmost point they reached was Konso. There, Jensen did pioneering research on the *gada* system and *waka* (wooden memorial steles). Within a year after their return to Frankfurt in 1935, Jensen had already managed to publish their findings in the voluminous monograph “Im Landes des Gada” (In the Land of Gada). He had caught fire with research in Ethiopia and especially the Konso region. However, the political situation short before World War II did not permit him to return soon. All the male researchers at the Frobenius Institute were finally recruited as soldiers. The female members of the institute tried to keep some activities going and rescue the institute and

its collections during this difficult period.² One of the women was Elisabeth Pauli, a trained painter who had joined the institute in 1933 and participated in several expeditions under the lead of Frobenius. During the years at the institute, Pauli became interested in ethnography herself. She and another female institute member, Agnes Schulz, spent the war preparing literature reviews on the peoples of southern Ethiopia. Though after the war men took over leading roles in the expeditions and research again, it is the work and publications of these two women that lay the foundations for the institute’s post-war expeditions to Ethiopia (Pauli 1944, 1950; Schulz 1941/43).

² The women hid the collections of the institute in different non-private and private houses in Frankfurt and its surrounding. Unfortunately, some of them were hit by bombs in March 1944. Therefore, parts of the pre-WW2 collection of the institute and also all notebooks and diaries of the first expedition to Ethiopia, are lost.

Under the Goodwill of the Emperor

After World War II ended, Jensen returned from the front. In 1946 he became the new director of the institute. Together with Pauli – who would eventually become his wife – he soon began to prepare the next expedition to south Ethiopia. In 1950 two young research assistants, Eike Haberland and Willy Schulz-Weidner, joined the institute and the expedition team. Both of them had just earned their PhDs in Social Anthropology, Haberland under the supervision of Jensen and Schulz-Weidner from the University of Mainz. The four team members left Frankfurt for Ethiopia in September 1950 and were the first German social anthropologists to go on expedition after World War II. They planned to travel as far south as Chew Bahir and the Dassanach people, but logistical problems, especially the shortage and fast exhaustion 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. Therefore, they mostly spent only a few weeks in one place. The research aimed at doing short surveys of a then still terra incognita instead of doing a thematically deep study of one group. While the other team members already went back to Frankfurt in autumn 1951, Haberland continued his research among the Borana until summer 1952.



Fig 2: Exhausted mules limited the study area

The next expedition to Ethiopia took place in 1954. The core of the team, Jensen and Pauli – now a married couple – and Haberland, remained the same. They were joined by two young researchers, one of them Helmut Straube, who later became professor in Munich. In his trip, Haberland wanted to clarify some data he had collected among the Borana and spent several weeks among the Wolayta, Jensen and Pauli did their main research among the Sidama, and Straube concentrated on the ethnography of the Western

Cushitic people.³ The major outcomes of these two expeditions in the 1950s were three large ethnographies, all of which shared a similar style and structure while dealing with different peoples: Jensen's *Altvölker Süd-Äthiopiens* (1959), Straube's *Westkuschitische Völker Süd-Äthiopiens* (1963), and Haberland's *Galla Süd-Äthiopiens* (1963). Like a major survey, they provided, 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 contained drawings of material culture as well as a good number of photographs. In addition to the broad ethnographies, Haberland used his collected data, especially the one from Wolayta, for his habilitation thesis on Ethiopian kingdoms (Haberland 1965). In 1967 he returned to Wolayta, where he studied the history and political organization more in depth. The findings from this second visit to Wolayta remain unpublished until today (see Abbink 2006; Barata 2017).

Material for three more ethnographies – a second one on the Konso (see Kansite 2017), one on Sidama (see Ambaye 2017), and one on Gedeo (see Getachew this volume and 2017) – was also collected by Jensen, but for different reasons the ethnographies remained unpublished. The main cause was Jensen's bad health condition after his return from the last Ethiopia expedition. He died in 1965, shortly after his retirement.



Fig 3: The team of the 1950/51 expedition in their camp in Maale

Haberland became the new director of the Frobenius Institute in 1968. Apart from a short sojourn to Oceania, he continued the focus on Ethiopian Studies at the Institute and initiated three more research expeditions to southern Ethiopia. In 1970–1971 Haberland went again to southern Ethiopia, this time to study the history of the Had-

³ Straube called the Cushitic language speakers located west of the Rift Valley lakes as “West Cushitic peoples”.

iya, Dauro and Gofa. He was accompanied by three institute members, among them Ulrich Braukämper, who later became professor at Göttingen. During his final expedition to Ethiopia from 1972 to 1974 Haberland, Braukämper and the doctoral student Werner Lange, conducted studies among the Hadiya, Sidama, Oromo, Gamo, Gofa, Kefa and Dizi.

While the earlier expeditions of the 1930s and 1950s had been organized as group undertakings, from the 1960s onwards – even if several people travelled together – the research projects were more individual and driven by specific research interests. This was due, on the one hand, to changing discourses in social anthropology, but on the other hand, to changes in the financing of research trips. Beginning in the 1960s, research trips to Ethiopia were mainly funded by travel funds for individual research projects, whereas before a complex system of fundraising (see Dinslage 2017) had been applied to finance expedition trips.

The comprehensive, survey-like ethnographies, which resulted from the expeditions of the 1950s were often criticized for their lack and/or obsolete theoretical contribution as well as a lack of timely methodology (see Abbink 2017; Fleming and Lewis 1961). The research interests of Frobenius Institute members involved in Ethiopian Studies at that time were above all cultural history (Abbink 2017; Bustorf 2014), prehistory (Kuba 2017; Thubauville 2012a and 2012b), the meritorious complex (Braukämper 2014), social stratification (see Epple 2017 and Kansite 2017), and the history of south Ethiopian kingships (see Data 2017).

Continuous contact with Emperor Haile Selassie had smoothed the way for the research activities of Jensen, Haberland and the other institute members. They regularly met the ruler after arriving in Ethiopia and his letters of recommendation guaranteed them the constant help of the administration and police forces in the south of the coun-



Fig 4: Jensen with the emperor in 1950

try.⁴ Haile Selassie also personally allowed the researchers to transport items of cultural heritage like the above mentioned stone stele to Germany (Thubauville 2012b: 86–88). The most obvious sign of the close relationship between Haile Selassie and the researchers was the fact that Haberland was awarded of the Haile Selassie Prize for Ethiopian Studies in 1971.

Research during the Derg Regime

After Haile Selassie's overthrow and the advent of the socialist regime in 1974, the research trips by the Frobenius Institute in Ethiopia came to an end. Haberland shifted his area of active research to West Africa, but he still had a lot of unpublished material from his former research trips and his publications on Ethiopia after 1974 were as numerous as those from his years of active study. Especially his last book – on social stratification among the Dizi – kept him busy until the very end of his career and finally had to be published posthumously (Haberland 1993).

During the socialist regime Haberland further kept an active interest in Ethiopia by supervising two Ethiopian PhD students in Frankfurt. The first student, Asfa-Wossen Asserate, a grand-nephew of Haile Selassie, was already enrolled as Haberland's PhD student when his father was executed during the socialist revolution. After earning his PhD,⁵ he stayed in Germany and became a well-known writer. Through his books,⁶ he greatly influences the German image of, and knowledge about, Ethiopia. Negasso Gidada, Haberland's second PhD student, came to Germany in 1974. While studying for his PhD,⁷ he held different offices within European Oromo associations and the Oromo Liberation Front in Europe. He returned to Ethiopia directly after the fall of the socialist regime and went on to become Ethiopia's first democratically elected president.

The second institute member who continued to be very active in Ethiopian Studies during the socialist regime was Ulrich Braukämper. Although he was unable to carry out research inside Ethiopia in that period, he became actively involved in assisting Ethiopian refugees in Germany and Ethiopia's neighbouring countries like Sudan and Somalia. With the death of Haberland in 1992 and Braukämper's move to Göttingen, where he became professor in 1994, the Frobenius Institute's focus on Ethiopian Studies temporarily came to an end.

4 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 at the same time a limitation, especially when it came to translations.

5 He earned his PhD in 1978 for the thesis "Die Geschichte von Sawa (Äthiopien) 1700–1865. Nach dem Tarika nagast des Belatten Geta Heruy Walda Sellase" (The history of Sawa (Ethiopia) 1700–1865. After the Tarika nagast by Belatten Geta Heruy Walda Sellase).

6 Most of his books are concerned with German culture and manners, questions of migration and integration and his family history. His book "Manieren" (manners) became a bestseller and he already received several German awards for his books as well as the federal cross of merit.

7 He earned his PhD in 1984 for his thesis „History of the Sayyoo Oromoo of Southwestern Wallaga, Ethiopia, from about 1730 to 1886”.

Legacies of Six Decades

Sixty years of research involving eleven researchers have left a big imprint in the archives of the Frobenius Institute. The scientific legacies of Jensen and Haberland stored in the institute's archive include various written documents, such as diaries and notebooks, travel reports, letters from, within and to the field, scripts for lectures, hand-drawn maps and even four unpublished manuscripts of ethnographies. The institute also has an administrative archive, which provides an insight into the financing of the expeditions to Ethiopia (Dinslage 2017). As the Frobenius Institute continuously put a great deal of effort into the visual documentation and collection of material culture, today more than 20,000 photographs and sketches, 83 film reels (Thubauville 2017) and around 1,200 ethnographic objects (Glück 2017) from the expeditions to southern Ethiopia can be found in the institute's various archives.

Between 2014 and 2017 the "Indexing and Digitizing of the Archival Material on Ethiopian Studies of the Frobenius Institute" project, financed by the German Research Foundation, has been indexing and sustainably archiving all of the above-mentioned material concerning Ethiopian Studies from the legacies of the Frobenius Institute. The project facilitated public access to these documents through an open-access database.⁸

As some of the methodological and theoretical parameters under which the researchers worked back then are obsolete and controversial today, the digitizing and indexing of the data was accompanied by a critical discussion of it. Furthermore, the dialogue with Ethiopian colleagues had been a central element of the project. Several colleagues had been invited to Frankfurt to deal with the archival material and review it from an Ethiopian perspective. Three of them – Ambaye Ogato, Getachew Senishaw and Kansite Gellebo – present their findings in this



Fig 5: Shelf with objects from Ethiopia in the ethnographic collection

⁸ www.frobenius-institut.de/aethiopien-datenbank

volume.⁹ The project furthermore financed a lecture series with leading international researchers such as Herbert Lewis, Jon Abbink, Ulrich Braukämper and Ivo Strecker. Their presentations discussed important methodological and theoretical problems around the contributions of Frobenius Institute researchers to the study of southern Ethiopia.¹⁰

The indexing, digitizing and reviews of the archival material were just a first step in the engagement with the archival material on Ethiopia at the Frobenius Institute. Although the published as well as the unpublished material has, as above mentioned, theoretical as well as methodological shortcomings – especially seen from today’s perspective – the only adequate way to deal with the material is to translate it into English and by that way make it available to the increasing number of Ethiopian scholars for whom the material is an important contribution to their country’s cultural diversity and history.

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⁹ Their findings, as well as an article by another colleague of Ethiopian origin, Data Dea Barata, can further be read in the publication “Seeking out wise old men. Six decades of Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute revisited” (Dinslage and Thubauville 2017).

¹⁰ Most of their presentations were published in the above mentioned publication.

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