

Foreword

Even though Leo Frobenius repeatedly emphasized the elective affinity between Ethiopian and German culture in his numerous publications, he never actually visited the core area of the Abyssinian Empire himself. Maybe this was due to the fact that he idealised the ‘infallible Ethiopians’ – as the title of one of his books, borrowed from Homer’s Iliad, calls them - to such an extent that he ultimately feared a confrontation with reality. He did, in any event, not take part any more in the last German Inner African Expedition (D.I.A.F.E. XIIb), despite having organised it. It took place between the years 1934 and 1935, and led its participants into southern Ethiopia, the land of the Konso and the Gede'ο. Headed by Frobenius’ student and later successor Adolf Ellegard Jensen, the journey established a tradition of research at the ‘Institut für Kulturmorphologie’, which was in 1946 renamed after its founder, Frobenius Institute. This tradition of research led to a great number of further ethnographic undertakings by the institute’s staff in the years following the war. The names of Helmuth von den Steinen, Hellmut Wohlenberg, Alf Bayerle, Eike Haberland, Willy Schulz-Weidner, Elisabeth Pauli, Helmut Straube, Siegfried Seyfarth, Karl-Heinz Striedter, and Ulrich Braukämper come to mind here. Since the late nineteen-sixties, a fruitful exchange with younger Ethiopian scholars flourished, some of which studied at the Goethe University in Frankfurt and did their PhD under Eike Haberland, who had taken over the leadership of the Frobenius Institute. Among them was Asfa-Wossen Asserate, a nephew of the last emperor of Ethiopia, who has made a name for himself in Germany with his outstanding cultural historic essays, and who must today be counted among the most important writers in the German language, as well as Nagaaso Gidaada, who was in 1995 elected president of his country.

Eike Haberland, who led the Institute until 1992, had already been forced to massively moderate all research activities in the difficult political situation of the upheaval that followed the overthrow of Hailé Sillase. They were mostly abandoned after his death and the four-year vacancy which followed it, since due to financial cuts and the appointments of several scholars away from the Institute, to other universities, the human resources needed were no longer available. Moreover, the new appointment of a director firstly engendered a regional and systematic re-orientation of the Institute’s areas of work. Among the new priorities, however, was also the registration, handling, and editing of the ethnographic documents and photographic inventory stored at the institute, amongst which those related to Ethiopia naturally were paid special attention.

In 2009, the traditional focus received new stimulus with the appointment of Sophia Thubauville as research assistant and director of the Institute’s library. Since then, numerous collaborations with Ethiopian academics, universities and research institutes are owed to her initiative. The part our Institute had in the planning of the exhibition and of the catalogue being published alongside it, too, was mainly carried out by her. My thanks for the realisation of this important enterprise goes to her as well as all the others involved, especially Wolbert Smidt, who curated the exhibition, and Irmtraut Hubatsch, who made possible a workshop on the same topic and the exhibition itself at the Goethe Institute. I am hopeful that it may mark the beginning of an era of close and intensive cooperation between German and Ethiopian scientific institutions.

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