# Leo Frobenius and Northeast Africa

## An Indiscreet Secret Mission and the Foundation of Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute

Sophia THUBAUVILLE

Much has been written about Leo Frobenius, a German Africanist who, not so much because of his missing university education, but more because of his disputed theories and eccentric character, was controversial in his own time and remains so today.[1] However, one of Frobenius' indisputable merits was his devotion to work. As his long list of publications (see Niggemeyer 1950) shows, he published his first articles when he was just twenty years old and by the age of twenty-one had already written his first monograph on African secret societies. During the twelve research expeditions to Africa (Inner-Afrikanische Forschungsexpeditionen) between 1904 and 1935 that took place under his leadership, Frobenius and members of his institute collected ethnographic data, oral traditions, visual material, ethnographic objects and documented rock art on a grand scale. A second fact that makes Frobenius outstanding is the value and equality that he assigned to African cultures that were at that time still looked down on as backward and as having no history of their own. In his publications he showed that culture exists everywhere where humans live (Haberland 1973: 3). While Frobenius is still widely known today in West Africa, where his aforementioned ideas inspired the Negritude (see Streck 2014), in Northeast Africa his name is hardly known.

The following article will show that Frobenius nevertheless played a role in German Northeast African Studies and even in the history of bilateral relations between Ethiopia and Germany. It explores two points of contact between Frobenius and Northeast Africa: a secret mission to the region that Frobenius undertook during World War I; and a regional focus on Ethiopia that developed at his research institute during the last years of his life.

### An indiscreet secret mission

In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, Frobenius was the outstanding expert on Africa in Germany. At the same time, he was a patriot and close friend of Emperor Wilhelm II. The two exchanged countless letters and Frobenius is known to have visited Wilhelm (Franzen 2006: 21; Franzen, Kohl, Recker 2012). Frobenius got financial support for his expeditions from Wilhelm II and in exchange he gave lectures at the exiled emperor's residence in Doorn. The charismatic Frobenius was the right person to captivate an audience of laymen (Franzen 2006: 23).

In November 1914 Frobenius' patriotism prompted him to offer his services and know-how to his country (Braukämper 1994). He had just returned from a long-term research expedition to Algeria when he indicated to the German military headquarters that he would be willing to reach Northeast Africa via Istanbul and Jeddah and try to trigger a revolt against the British in Sudan (Heine 1980: 1), since it was believed by the German leaders that the British in Egypt, especially at the Suez Canal, could be threatened from there. Frobenius knew the Sudan from a recent expedition in 1912, but he was unfamiliar with both Eritrea and Ethiopia, which he would have to cross first. Nor did he speak any local languages or have contacts in these countries. However, his proposal was accepted immediately. One reason was that Ethiopia was surrounded by Germany's enemies and the German legation in the country had been cut off from any communication for some time. Frobenius could therefore not only play out his own plan in Sudan, but also be used as a messenger to the German legation in Ethiopia. Furthermore, he had asked for only

Fig. 1: Drawing by Carl Arriens showing Frobenius during the Algeria expedition

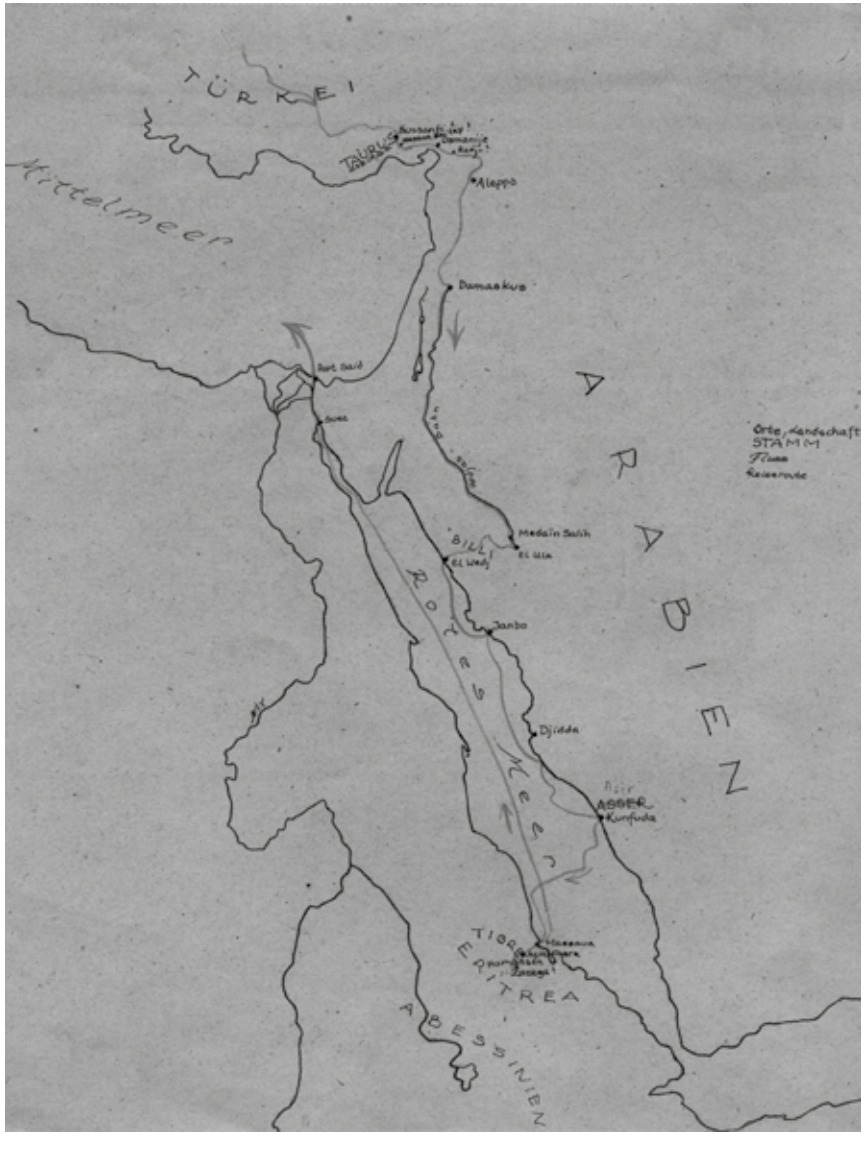
a very moderate amount of money to conduct the mission, as he was able to use the equipment from his former research expedition, which made practical preparations quick and easy (Da Riva 2009: 56).

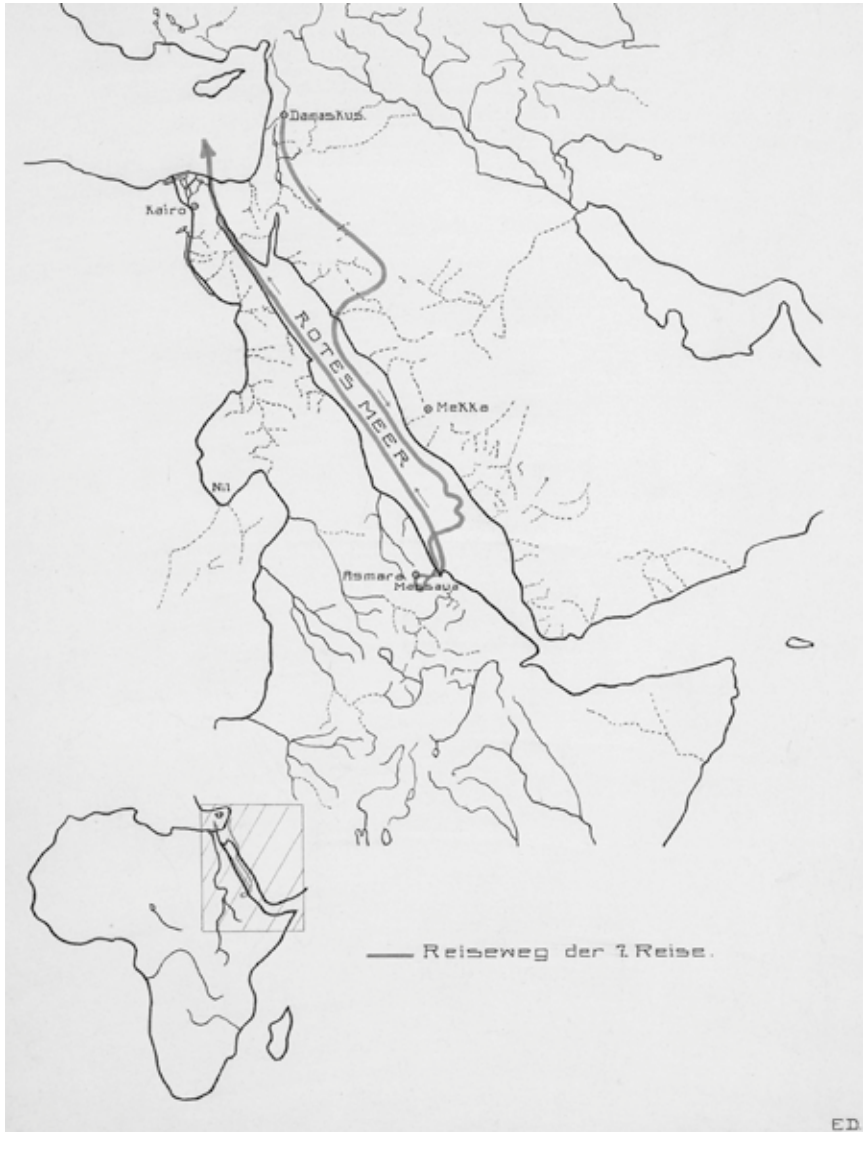
The expedition was planned as a joint mission by Germany and Turkey. While Germany wanted to reduce the influence of the Entente powers in Northeast Africa, Turkey hoped to reclaim Egypt from the British. Both countries were convinced that encouraging solidarity between the Muslim populations of the region would help to achieve their aims (Andreas Eshete 1974: 12). In these plans, Ethiopia again played a major role as the then emperor, Lij Iyasu, was favourable to Islam, and the German legation in Ethiopia tried to facilitate a union between him and the 'Mad Mullah' (Mohammed Abdullah Hassan), Somalia's religious and nationalist leader (Da Riva 2009: 46).

Frobenius had a craving for publicity and titles. Before he set out on his mission, he asked to be awarded several designations. He was therefore given the title 'kaiserlicher geheimer Regierungsrat' (Privy Councillor)[2] and was entitled to call himself Pasha (Da Riva 2009: 50). With his newly gained titles and four European companions at hand he left for Istanbul.

In Istanbul, Frobenius still had to arrange some practical matters as the mission had left Germany at very short notice (Heine 1980: 3). Finally, he and his comrades left the town on Christmas Eve 1914 and, travelling mainly by train, arrived at Damascus on 10 January 1915. In Damascus, further crew members joined the mission including Solomon Hall, an Ethiopian son of a missionary (Da Riva 2009: 52).[3] Together they continued the trip by train to Al-Ula and from there by camel to Al-Wajh, a Red Sea port. They sailed along the Arabian coast for two weeks and then boarded a larger sailing ship to cross the Red Sea (Braukämper 1994: 558).

Crossing the Red Sea took them another four weeks. Frobenius and his mission tried to hide their foreign identity by dressing up in Arabic robes (see picture above). A close encounter would, however, have revealed their foreign origin easily. Therefore, when the French cruiser Desaix inspected their Sambuk, the European mission hid in a corner of the hold (Da Riva 2009: 77). Finally, on 15 February 1915 they reached




Figs. 2a–b: Maps showing the itinerary of the mission

Fig. 3: Crossing the Red Sea from Konfuda to Massawa. Frobenius (in white robe) and expedition members. To the rear on the left side is their Sambuk



Massawa. As Italy was neutral, the German mission, and especially Frobenius, incorrectly supposed that the Italians would let them pass through Eritrea and they would no longer have to hide their identity. Moreover, Frobenius, who could never get enough of titles, introduced himself as a military captain, thereby making the Italians suspicious (Da Riva 2009: 82) and revealing the military character of the mission. Even though the German consul in Italy tried to claim Frobenius was merely a messenger for the German legation in Ethiopia, the Italians did not let the mission pass through Eritrea and took care to ensure that every individual left the country. Frobenius and the European participants of the mission were put on a mail ship to Rome on 23 March 1915.

Back in Berlin Frobenius was – even though the failure of his mission was obviously his fault – awarded a German military decoration, the Ehrenkreuz II (Heine 1980: 4). Eloquent as ever, Frobenius managed to present the mission as a success and neither his friendship with the emperor nor his scientific reputation seemed to have been harmed

Fig. 4: Market in Asmara; photograph taken by unknown expedition member

by the unsuccessful undertaking. Moreover, Frobenius himself found – or at least described in front of others – his mission and especially the contacts he had made[4] of the highest importance and directly proposed a second mission with the same aim. This time his proposal was rejected. Instead he became the principal of a detention camp for African and Indian soldiers, where he tried to improve conditions for the prisoners and was able to record African myths (Kuba 2014).

The failure of this political mission can, of course, be partly blamed on Frobenius' character; he lacked the most important quality of a secret agent – discreetness. However, the mission also lacked the preparations on a political and military level that should have been made by the responsible office, the 'Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient'.[5]

Even though the mission had not affected Frobenius' reputation and relations with the emperor, his political involvement resulted in certain difficulties for his future scientific work. His name was now known by Allied intelligence services, which continued to consider him a dangerous German agent (Da Riva 2009: 33). When Frobenius arrived in Cairo in 1926 with plans to proceed to Sudan, Britain had not forgotten his former mission and placed him on the blacklist (Da Riva 2009: 107). One year later he visited London with travelling plans for Rhodesia from whence he wanted to proceed to Tanganyika, but he received travel restrictions for Kenya and Uganda (Da Riva 2009: 108). Frobenius had always used publicity successfully to further his scientific work, however, his fame among the secret services now afflicted his research expeditions.

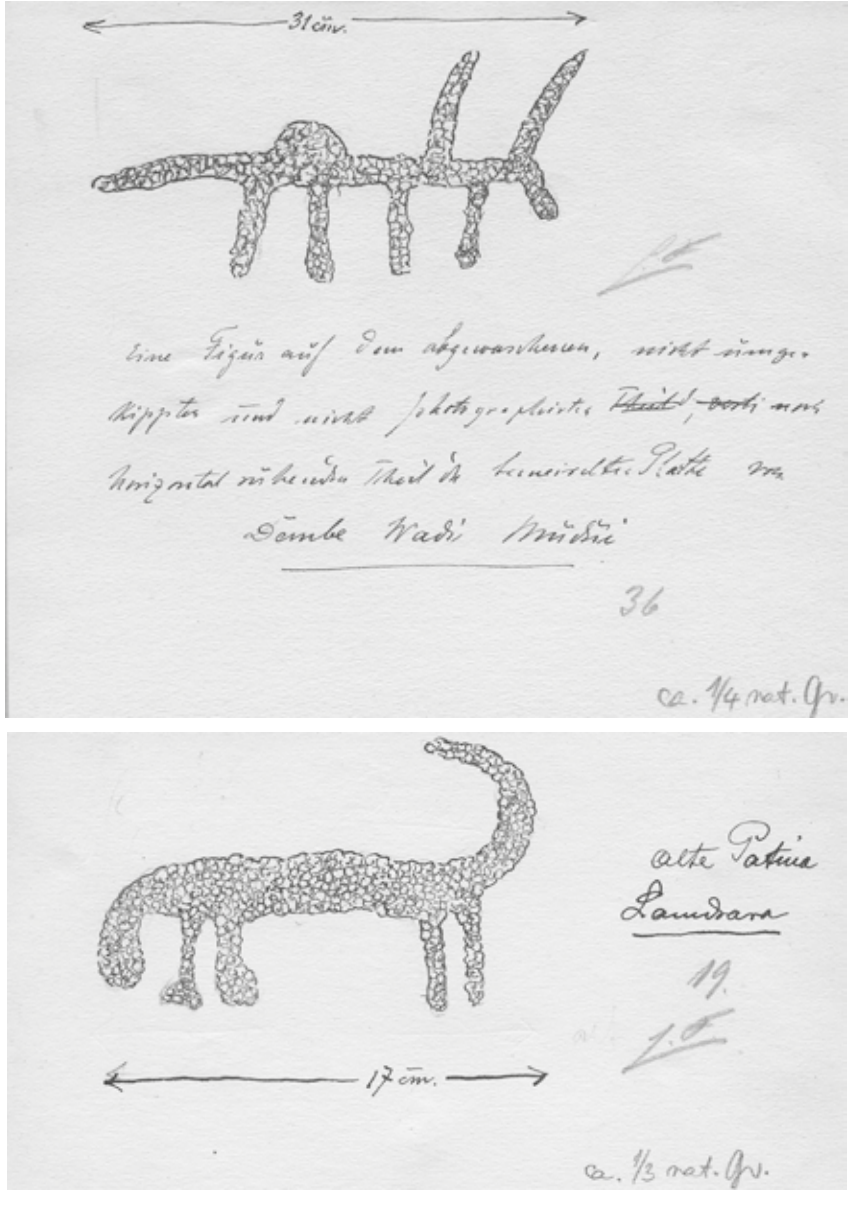
Probably less the result of Frobenius's mission, which did not even reach Ethiopia, and more the work of diplomats in Addis Ababa, was Lij Iyasu's commitment to Germany. According to a letter written by the German legation in 1916, the Ethiopian emperor favoured Germany's plans for Northeast Africa and even assisted in destroying Italy's wireless stations. According to some sources, Germany's plan to make Lij Iyasu cooperate with the Somali leader worked out and he married a daughter of the 'Mad Mullah' and converted to Islam (Scholler 1980: 314). Lij Iyasu's plan to reign over a large Ethiopian empire, including the Muslim regions of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden, can be seen as inspired by Turkish and German agents (Andreas Eshete 1974: 15).[6]

Fig. 5: Landscape near Asmara; photograph taken by unknown expedition member



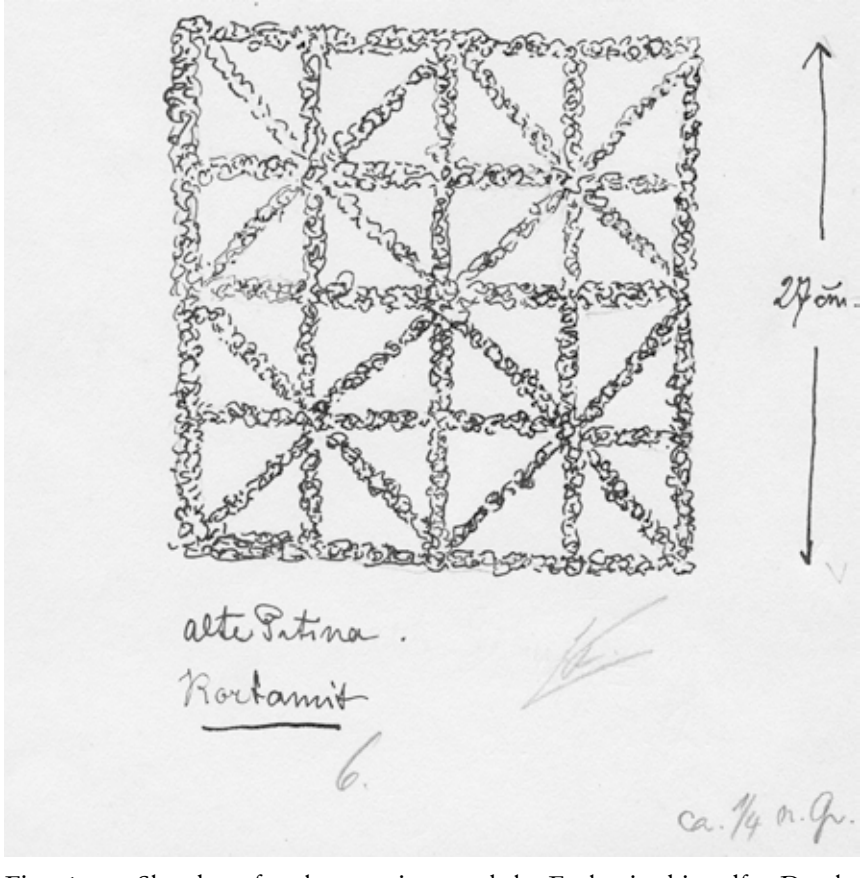
## The foundations of Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute

Frobenius' secret mission to Northeast Africa was obviously no scientific expedition. During the five weeks that Frobenius spent in Eritrea, he was mainly involved in negotiations with the Italian authorities and only briefly visited Zazega in the Hamasén area. As Braukämper (1994: 559) rightly states, the otherwise so plentifully filled photo catalogues at the archives of the Frobenius Institute list not even 100 photographs taken on Eritrean ground. Most of them show landscapes, buildings and people following daily activities. Even though they are small in number, they are valuable as they are some of the only photographs taken in the area at that time. Apart from photographs Frobenius himself made thirty-seven sketches of rock engravings (see the example below) at four sites in the region (Zazega, Maji Malehesh, Lamdrara and Dembe Wadi Mudui), which are also an important documentation (Cervicek 1976). However, Frobenius' concept of the Eritrean culture




circle is not based on his trip to the Hamasén region, but was generated by information he gathered during a later expedition to Zimbabwe. He used the term Erithräa not in relation to the country, but to refer to the Red Sea or, as it had been called by the ancient Greeks, the Eritrean Sea, (Braukämper 1994: 559; Frobenius 1931).

Frobenius used the information gained in the Hamasén area for only one short article (Frobenius 1916) in which he sketchily describes the




Figs. 6a–c: Sketches of rock engravings made by Frobenius himself at Dembe Wadi Mudui

architecture of houses in the Hamasén region and compares them with earlier observations from Sudan and Libya. He concludes this article by saying that the most important insight of this expedition from Arabia via the Red Sea to Eritrea was to acknowledge the relevance of conducting further research concentrating on the Red Sea area as a cultural junction between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean (Frobenius 1916: 100).

However, about twenty years later, in 1934, when the first scientific expedition of the Frobenius Institute was about to depart for Northeast Africa, its destination was not determined by Frobenius' previously formulated research interests. Instead, attention to that part of the world had been drawn by A.E. Jensen's expedition, which had recorded rich findings of stone stela in southern Ethiopia (Azaïs and Chambard 1931). The 1934/35 expedition to Ethiopia was the last of the twelve major research expeditions by the Frobenius Institute (Inner-Afrikanische Forschungsexpeditionen) and the first one in which Frobenius himself did not take part. In 1925 his institute, then called 'Institut für Kulturmorphologie', was transferred from Munich to Frankfurt and became affiliated to the university. In 1932 Frobenius was appointed honorary professor for 'Völker- und Kulturkunde' and in 1934 he was additionally engaged as director of the 'Völkermuseum'. By then Frobenius was 61 years old and prepared for a generational transfer at his institute. Therefore he handed over the directorship of the last major expedition to his younger colleague A.E. Jensen, whom he named director of the Abyssinia department (Frobenius 1936).

Jensen, a former student of Frobenius, who was similarly industrious but less eccentric than his teacher, fell in love with Southern Ethiopia, especially the Konso area, during the 1934/35 expedition. He promptly published the expedition findings in a major monograph (Jensen 1936). In 1938 Frobenius died and the Second World War was just months away. Jensen was conscripted as a soldier and returned to the institute only at the end of the war in 1945. In 1946 he was appointed as director of the institute and changed its name to the Frobenius Institute. The years following the war were difficult. Frankfurt had been seri-

Fig. 7: Frobenius in the Hamasén area; photo by Mario Passarge, 1915

Fig. 8: Small hamlet in the Hamasén area; photo by Mario Passarge, 1915

Fig. 9: Church in the Hamasén area; photo by Mario Passarge, 1915



Fig. 10: Documentation of a typical house in Hamasén, Colonia Eritrea, photo from the Frobenius expedition 1915

Fig. 11: Inside the historical church of Tse'azzega, at the former seat of the Ad Deggiyat governors of Hamasén, photo from the Frobenius expedition 1915

ously bombed and though female researchers at the institute had tried to hide its collections in safe places, some parts had been destroyed. However, as early as 1950, Jensen had secured enough funds to continue with long-term research expeditions. The first was meant to leave for Ethiopia. This time Jensen took two freshly graduated PhD holders with him, Eike Haberland and Willy Schulz-Weidner. Haberland would not only become Jensen's successor as director of the Frobenius Institute but would also continue the tradition of Ethiopian Studies there. Between 1950 and Haberland's death in 1992, five major research expeditions to Ethiopia took place in which eleven researchers from the institute were involved. They focused above all on the ethnography of the south of the country (Haberland 1986: 37). For his devotion to Ethiopian Studies, Haberland was awarded the Haylé Sïllassé Prize in

1971. He was also interested in close academic cooperation between the two countries and attracted Ethiopian PhD students, amongst them Nagaaso Gidaada and *Lij* Asfa-Wossen Asserate, to study at the Frobenius Institute. The regional focus was unfortunately not continued after 1974 because of the political turmoil under the socialist regime in Ethiopia. Haberland died in 1992 and did not live to see his former student, Nagaaso Gidaada, become president of Ethiopia.

Since 2010 Ethiopian Studies have been reactivated as one of the institute's regional foci on a smaller scale. A current project within the collaborative research project Africa's Asian Options (AFRASO) analyzes Ethiopia's university boom and academic migration from India to Ethiopia. Furthermore, since 2013, the Frobenius Institute has again intensified academic cooperation with Ethiopia, especially through a Social Anthropology PhD exchange programme with Addis Ababa University. Finally, a digitizing project has begun to make the rich archival material that resulted from the earlier research activities of the Frobenius Institute in Ethiopia available in an online database to which the international community of Ethiopists will have access.

## Conclusion

What can one conclude from the depictions above that show Leo Frobenius' activities with regard to Northeast Africa? Frobenius' scientific theories concerning Africa's historicity and culture inspired the Negritude and therefore Africa's independence movement. His political activities in Northeast Africa during World War I, however, show him as a nationalist who voluntarily offered his services to Germany's attempt to expand its colonial power. This, however, was quite usual for anthropologists of all nationalities at that time (see Kohl 2014). Behind Frobenius' mission to Northeast Africa seemed to lie an overestimation of his own capabilities combined with an extraordinary naivety that made him believe that he – a European unfamiliar with the local conditions and languages – could not only successfully conduct the planned mission, but could do so without consequences. Even though his mission did not harm his scientific reputation, it endangered his future research expeditions as he was blacklisted by secret services, which thenceforth followed his activities with great attention.

As much as his role as a secret agent questions his neutrality as a researcher from today's perspective, one also has to acknowledge Frobenius for his lifework: the foundation of Germany's oldest research institute for social anthropology, which he and his successors were able to safeguard through two wars. A genius at fundraising, Frobenius also raised the money for twelve extended research expeditions to Africa, the last of which – even without him – found its way to Southern Ethiopia and returned with invaluable documents about the place at that time, which inspired, and continue to inspire, researchers' interest in Ethiopian Studies at the Frobenius Institute.

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Figs. 6a–c: Sketches of rock engravings made by Frobenius himself at Dembe Wadi Mudui, register no. FBA A 05-037, 020, 007 © Frobenius Institute

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Fig.: 9 Church in the Hamasén area, register no. FoA-07-8207 © Frobenius Institute

Fig. 10: Documentation of a typical house in Hamasén, Colonia Eritrea, photo from the Frobenius expedition 1915, courtesy of the Frobenius Institute (code: 7-8179)

Fig. 11: Inside the historical church of Tse'azzega, at the former seat of the Ad Deggiyat governors of Hamasén, photo from the Frobenius expedition 1915, courtesy of the Frobenius Institute (code: 7-8222)

## Endnotes

1 Haberland described him as 'Romantischer Schwärmer und zupackender Realist, biederer Konservativer und rücksichtsloser Nonkonformist, Verehrer des Kaisers und Verachter von Autoritäten, asketischer Forscher und publizitätsfreudiger, von Eitelkeit beileibe nicht freier Propagandist seiner Pläne, Bücherwurm und Expeditionsleiter, als Gründer und Organisator ebenso unbegabt wie erfolgreich' (1973: 1).

2 Even though he was entitled to use this title only for the duration of his mission, it became his favourite title from then onwards. In scientific correspondence and publications he added the title 'Geheimrat' to his name. Even after his death members of his institute addressed his wife in letters as 'Frau Geheimrat' instead of the more usual 'Frau Professor'.

3 Hall's mission had actually been a separate mission and was merged with Frobenius' into one in Damascus. After Frobenius' mission failed, Hall was sent again to Ethiopia as a messenger in 1915. He was caught in Eritrea and imprisoned there for three years (Scholler 1980).

4 According to the German ambassador in Turkey, Frobenius himself was an annoyance to his German companions as well as to the members who joined the mission later. Contacts were only made because of the diplomacy of his companions Sami Bey and Solomon Hall, who translated for Frobenius (Heine 1980).

5 The Nachrichtenstelle für den Orient was responsible for several other failed missions (Heine 1980) with agents, 'some as eccentric as Frobenius' (Da Riva 2009: 41,42).

6 A recent publication on new insights of Lij Iyasu's reign, however, does not provide any evidence for alliances between Ethiopia and Germany or the Ottoman Empire nor for a formal conversion of Lij Iyasu to Islam (Smidt 2014: 107).