

From Pessimism to Collaboration: The German Frobenius-Expedition (1938–1939) to Australia and the representation of Kimberley art and rock art

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ABSTRACT

In 1938 and 1939 the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie*, based in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, conducted an ethnographic expedition into the remote Kimberley in Western Australia. Despite some earlier activities and publications, this expedition represents the first dedicated effort to conduct detailed and extensive ethnographic work in the region. It was also the first endeavour to specifically focus on the recording of rock art images and related ethnographic information. Over the last decades, the importance of this expedition, the respective publications and the related collections in Germany and Australia have been repeatedly recognised, particularly in relation to the perception and understanding of Kimberley rock art. However, systematic and collaborative community-based research has not been conducted. Therefore, the collection and the related ethnographic information have not been properly assessed and have even been misrepresented. Recent collaborative efforts between the relevant Aboriginal *Wandjina Wunggurr* communities and researchers in Australia and Germany have allowed entering a new phase in the engagement with these materials with valuable academic and non-academic outcomes. In this paper, we provide some preliminary critical and contextual assessments of the literature that is related to this expedition and how it represented and conceptualised Aboriginal art and rock art.

Keywords: Australian Aboriginal rock art, German anthropology, critical research history, Kimberley (Northwest Australia)

INTRODUCTION

The time between the 1890s and 1930s has recently been described by Hasinoff and Bell (2015:1) as the ‘the era of great expeditions’, a period characterised by innumerable expeditions sent out by different nations of the Global North ‘in pursuit of scientific facts and specimens for natural history and the allied field of anthropology’. As a product of European colonialism these endeavours were characterised by a significant variability in motivation, funding, organisation, extent and impact. Expeditions during this period can be regarded as a mirror phenomenon to the increasing and systematic establishment of museums, archives and other collections (Hasinoff & Bell 2015: 4). Through such institutions, these expeditions not

only had an impact on the perception and construction of the world and the Other, but they also left an extensive legacy that is only starting to be acknowledged and examined.

Studying ethnographic archival collections has developed into a major field of research in recent years. Interest in these collections has changed together with an understanding of anthropology as a study of ‘the Other’ towards a discipline (embracing archaeology) that reflectively aims to understand the dialectic construction of sameness and otherness over time and in relation to changing socio-economic conditions (e.g. Bell *et al.* 2013). In this context, processes of critical decolonisation have impacted on the perception of ethnographic collections and how they should be treated, curated and exhibited. Following Foucault and Derrida, Zeitlyn (2012) has argued that archives have the potential to be both controlling, imperial and oppressive as well as liberating and subversive. They can be understood as reflections of hegemonic appropriation and at the same time they can be sources of cultural resistance, survival and rediscovery.

These aspects are also relevant in the context of ethnographic collections from Australia. Engagement with the latter can be a major challenge given distance, language

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barriers and the willingness and availability of research partners. Cultural sensibilities also must be addressed appropriately and this can be a major obstruction without specialist advice and involvement of authorised representatives of the relevant Aboriginal communities. Involvement of the latter appears to be imperative not only from an ethical perspective. It gives today's Aboriginal people the chance to reconnect with their heritage and understand historical processes of knowledge creation and even corrections of past misinterpretations and misrepresentations (see e.g. contributions in Brown & Peers 2013). Epistemologically, collaborative research allows understanding of the complex dialectics involved in the contexts of past knowledge production and the constitution of archives. This approach does not only give today's Aboriginal people an active voice in the research process, it also recalibrates the understanding of past and local interactions in the context of ethnographic expeditions. As O'Hanlon (2000: 4) has argued, this perspective has the 'potential to throw light upon unconsidered aspects of local agency, without losing sight of either broader colonial processes or the effect of the collectors' own agendas' (O'Hanlon 2000: 4; see also Byrne *et al.* 2011). In this spirit, with this paper we are hoping to contribute to a better understanding of some aspects of the historiography of anthropological and archaeological research in Australia from an explicitly collaborative and international perspective.

In 1938 the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* (trans.: Institute for Cultural Morphology) in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, conducted an ethnographic expedition into the Northwest Kimberley in Western Australia. The members of this expedition engaged in intense ethnographic fieldwork within the Country of the *Wanjina Wunggurr* community, who received their Native Title determinations in 2011. We want to stress that in this paper we do not engage in more detailed explanations of the complex Aboriginal concepts of the so-called rock art in the Northwest Kimberley (for more information see e.g. Blundell 2003; Blundell & Woolagoodja 2005; Blundell & Woolagoodja 2012; Porr & Bell 2012). We will also not discuss the relationships between these concepts and the (published) results of the expedition. As we aim to show below, the latter is a particularly important task for future collaborative research. Rather, we provide some preliminary critical and contextual assessments of the literature that is related to this expedition and how it represented and conceptualised Aboriginal art and rock art.

Over the last decades, the importance of this expedition, the respective publications and the related collections in Germany have been repeatedly recognised, but systematic and collaborative community-based research has not been conducted. Therefore, the collections and the related ethnographic information have not been properly assessed and are even being misrepresented and naïvely used to support specific academic and interest based arguments about local Indigenous 'rock art'. From an Australian per-

spective, it appears that the language barrier has been the main factor influencing the perception of the value of the expedition itself and the resulting publications. Only one of the main publications of the original expedition participants was originally published in English (Schulz 1956) while the remaining two (Lommel 1952; Petri 1954) were only translated in 1997 and 2011. Furthermore, in 2014 Helmut Petri's German *Habilitation* publications were published as an English translation (Petri 1952; 1953; 2014) by an Australian publisher.

It needs to be stressed that all the translations mentioned above were conducted and published without input from nor consent of the respective Traditional Owners. We would argue that this indicates a lack of respect for today's Aboriginal communities given the greater awareness and contemporary practices of engaging collaboratively with members of those communities when attempting to decolonialise the research process, better understand Aboriginal culture and prepare more ethical research materials. Unfortunately, the materials appear to be published as direct translations from the German with no or minimal commentary and contextual research. Certainly, there are assumptions which are problematic and provocative in the more recent publications as seen in the description of Petri's monograph (2014) on the publisher's website as 'the second volume of a trilogy of translations of Petri's important work in a culture *now destroyed* (emphasis added)¹. Apart from the obvious problematic and ethical dimensions (e.g. in relation to the culturally appropriate reproduction of photographs), this situation points to a lack of analytical engagement with the materials and suggests an unreflective and simplistic representation of the important cultural information that is contained within the expedition materials.

In Australia, only Beinssen-Hesse has so far critically engaged with the materials related to the Frobenius expedition to the Kimberley. In 1991 she published the first English overview of the expedition and subsequently also an exchange between Leo Frobenius (the director of the home institution of the expedition), Helmut Petri (his assistant, who directed the expedition in Australia) and her father, Ekkehard Beinssen. The latter was a local businessman of German descent and Frobenius sought financial and logistical support from him and his father. The exchange gives some fascinating insights into the initial plans for the expedition and later developments (Beinssen-Hesse 2004a, 2004b). Beyond these two book chapters there has so far been almost no systematic archival and critical-anthropological work on the Frobenius research materials. This paper is a preliminary attempt to further contextualise the available publications and to draw attention to their complex histories and relationships. Our aim is also to begin considering the value of undertaking more detailed research on these documents themselves along with the primary research materials they are based on.

THE FROBENIUS EXPEDITIONS

The expedition to the Kimberley was named after the founder of the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* Leo Frobenius. However, he did not participate in the expedition; in fact, he died in August 1938 when the members of the expedition were engaged in their main fieldwork in the Kimberley. It was the 22nd so-called Frobenius expedition and it was the first to Australia. To understand the character of the visit to the Kimberley and the research methods and intellectual frameworks that were employed by the participants, it is first necessary to engage with the creator of these expeditions as well as their particular history.

Leo Frobenius was born in 1873 and was to become one of the founding figures of German social anthropology (see e.g. Heinrichs 1998; Bunzl & Penny 1999; Streck 2014). He certainly was the most publicly visible and active figure in this developing field until he died. He was an extremely ambivalent and yet charismatic personality. He has been described as an adventurer and ethnographic collector, explorer, ethnographer and cultural philosopher. Despite his great influence and charm he was also a heavily criticised and controversial figure, especially within German academia itself.

From early childhood, Frobenius was inspired by a fascination with non-Western cultures and interpreted them as representatives of earlier stages of humanity's history. He also was interested in the collections of German folk tales put together by the Grimm brothers and Gottfried Herder, who suggested that all of humanity is united by an underlying mythological stratigraphy, which can in Europe only be accessed through folk tales (*Märchen*). His overall interpretative framework and vision became known as cultural morphology or morphology of culture (*Kulturmorphologie*) (Georget *et al.* 2016).

For a substantial amount of time, Frobenius worked as an armchair scholar, but during the early 20th century he felt that it was time to gather first-hand data and information of ancient layers of human culture. He decided that Africa would provide the best opportunities to experience human culture in its original condition and the processes of original creation (Streck 2014: 120). This decision was the origin of what would become the so-called Frobenius expeditions, which were initially called '*Deutsche Innerafrikanische Forschungsexpeditionen*' (D.I.A.F.E.). Frobenius planned and conducted altogether 12 expeditions to Africa between 1904 and 1934, with additional visits to India (1929/30) and rock art recording trips to Jordan, Spain and Scandinavia during the 1930s. The locations for these expeditions were carefully chosen after Frobenius's own literature research and he targeted regions in which he perceived the old cultures to be most threatened by modern and colonial influences and destruction (Kuba 2016) (Figure 1).

In Frobenius's research paradigm, Indigenous art and rock art related to a universal human ability of fundamen-



Figure 1. Leo Frobenius during fieldwork in Zimbabwe in 1923 (Archive of the *Frobenius-Institut*, Frankfurt am Main; FOA 09–10133 0; published with kind permission).

tal understanding, which is non-discursive and irrational: 'the symbolism of images knows no logic in a modern sense (*die Bildersymbolik kennt keine Logik im modernen Sinne*)' (Streck 2014: 35; Streck 2016). It was particularly opposed to the modern influences of literary education and thought. Rock art held a particular place within Frobenius's worldview as an expression of the most foundational characteristics of human culture. His concept of human society and human engagement with their surrounds was certainly extremely idealistic and romantic. It also appears as naïve and analytically uncritical in today's research arena as it did even then. Professional and academic contemporaries were very much aware of Frobenius's particular 'fanciful reality' and during his whole career he was heavily criticised. However, this did not diminish his broad public standing and the popularity of his work and, importantly, his ability to gain substantial (financial) support from influential business circles and individuals in Germany (Streck 2014).

Frobenius was an enthusiastic supporter of the German Monarchy (in fact, he believed that democracy could only mean the end of civilisation and only aristocracy could be trusted to preserve it). He was a friend of the last German Emperor, Wilhelm II, and an extensive cor-

respondence developed between them, based on mutual admiration, while the *Kaiser* was living in exile in the Netherlands after WWI (Franzen *et al.* 2012). At the same time, Frobenius sympathised with Hitler and the Nazi Regime and tried to use his NSDAP² connections to his own advantage during his time in Frankfurt am Main as director of the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie*. It is therefore not surprising that subsequent assessments have been unkind to Frobenius's life and work, particularly in Germany, although he also had to resist allegations of not following Nazi ideology at that time.

Ironically, the mostly critical perception of Frobenius in the Western academic world was not completely shared in Africa itself. Most famously, the President of the Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, said that Frobenius gave Africa back its dignity and that his work supported and inspired the African anti-colonial movement (Streck 2014: 17–18). This can only be appreciated in the light of Frobenius's enthusiasm for 'the original and the foundational', which he regarded as creative and active in human history. In this sense, he provided a counter position to the evolutionism in the French and Anglo-American traditions, which saw African and other non-Western societies as representing static, earlier and arrested stages of human history. In this sense, Frobenius's writings contained a positive vision for African post-colonial intellectuals and contradicted earlier colonialist oppressive ideologies. However, it also needs to be stressed that the political and social circumstances and consequences of Frobenius's various activities in Africa are complex and still need systematic assessment (see e.g. Schlanger 2003 on some South African aspects or Kuba & Hambolu 2010 on West Africa).

Due to the many contradictions in Leo Frobenius's thinking and oeuvre, sections of his extensive rock art archive were both shown in 1935 in the Reichstag in Berlin and in 1937 in New York as part of an exhibition in the *Museum of Modern Art* (and in a subsequent travelling exhibition in the US). Frobenius himself travelled to New York, funded both by Walter P. Chrysler Jr. and the Foreign Ministry of Nazi Germany (Kuba 2008). Therefore, rock images from the Frobenius Archive were first exhibited in Germany to support the ideology of the Nazis. But only a couple of years later, the same rock images were shown in the US to illustrate the connections between archaic and modern art. Here, they were exhibited alongside paintings by Paul Klee, Hans Arp or Joan Mirò (where they possibly influenced Jackson Pollock and other contemporary expressionist painters), modern artists, who were violently oppressed by the Nazi Regime (Kohl *et al.* 2016).

In any case, Frobenius was the first person to carry out dedicated ethnographic expeditions in Africa and he amassed one of the most extensive ethnographic collections of the 20th century. As outlined above, the value of these collections of objects, drawings, recordings and photographs is variable and they certainly do not measure up to modern standards of anthropological and material

culture research. However, the systematic assessment of Frobenius's various collections is still a task that has to be pursued, and this can certainly be said about the '*Frobenius-Expedition*' to the Kimberley as well.

THE FROBENIUS-EXPEDITION TO THE NORTHWEST KIMBERLEY, 1938/1939

In 1937 the *Institut für Kulturmorphologie* succeeded in acquiring the permission from the Australian Government to conduct an ethnographic expedition to the Northwest Kimberley in Western Australia. Despite some earlier activities and publications (see e.g. Love 1936; Elkin 1945; Capell 1972), this expedition represents the first dedicated effort to conduct detailed and extensive ethnographic work in the region (Beinssen-Hesse 1991). Helmut Petri was named as the director of this *Frobenius-Expedition xxII* (Figure 2). The other main participants were anthropologist Andreas Lommel as well as the artists/painters Gerta Kleist and Agnes Schulz. The latter were to produce reproductions of Indigenous rock art. Because of the Second World War, the compilations of the results of this expedition were delayed and only published more than ten years later in several monographs and articles (Lommel 1952; Petri 1954; Schulz 1956). The main protagonists of the expedition continued to work in Australia (Lommel & Lommel 1959; Schulz 1971). Helmut Petri, especially, continued extensive ethnographic fieldwork at the southern periphery of the Kimberley, e.g. at La Grange Mission from 1954 onwards (see overview in Tauchmann 1973b). Only then, in 1954, was Petri's extensive monograph on his 1938 expedition published: *Sterbende Welt in Nordwestaustralien*. It mostly reflects his ethnographic fieldwork among Ngarinyin people around the former Munja government station in the Western Kimberley (Tauchmann 1973b).

The motivation behind the initial expedition to the Kimberley follows the pattern that was established by Frobenius over several decades and in different research arenas. Based on extensive literature research and correspondence with relevant researchers or government officials an area was selected that was seen to provide the greatest potential for encountering an original and untouched culture and/or where the latter was most threatened by colonial and outside influences (Streck 2014: 45–46). In the case of the Kimberley, which had been penetrated relatively little in the 1930s by colonial settlement, the knowledge exposed in the available literature (Elkin 1930; Love 1936) about rock art and cultural relationships between the local Aboriginal communities and the art also contributed to the selection of the Northwest Kimberley as the most promising research region (Beinssen-Hesse 2004a).

The expedition itself was consequently conducted in a fashion that was very like Frobenius's earlier endeavours. As far as it can be estimated at this stage, the expedition

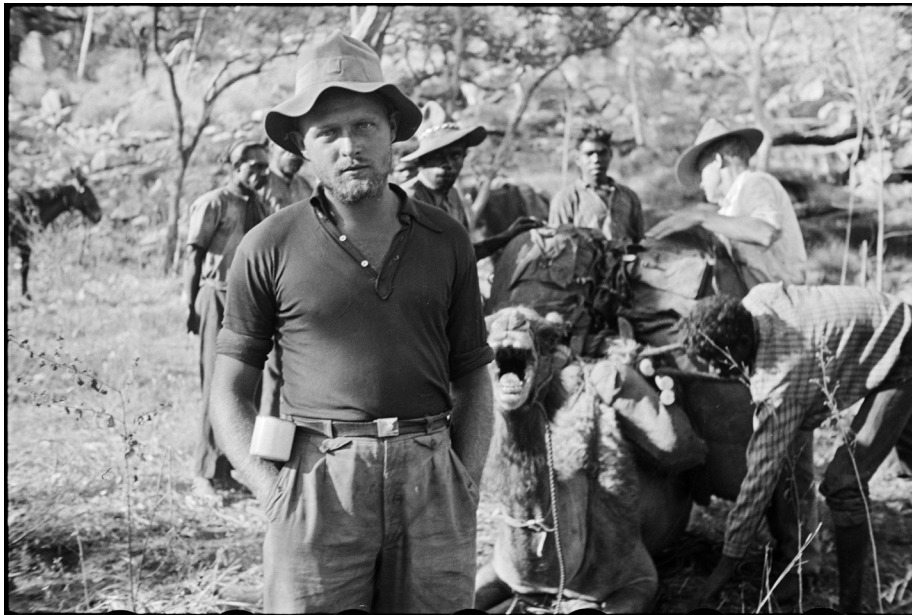


Figure 2. Helmut Petri during fieldwork at the Munja Government Station in 1938, Kimberley, Northwest Australia (Archive of the *Frobenius-Institut*, Frankfurt am Main; FoA 22 FB09 18; published with kind permission).

was strategically planned and executed to achieve a certain outcome. It was done within a very clear time frame (May – December 1938) and was intended to be a very intense period of collecting and recording. In this sense, it was conducted as an ethnographic salvage or rescue operation. Overall, relationships between the researchers and the local Aboriginal groups appear to have been quite amicable. The details of fieldwork procedures, however, still need to be assessed using original documentation, field notes and other archival materials.

As was mentioned above, the expedition included two anthropologists and two illustrators/painters. The exact roles of two other participants, Douglas Fox and P. Pentony are not completely clear at this stage; they appear to have had supporting roles, and Fox seems to have been responsible for logistics, produced most of the photographs and copied a number of rock images. The focus of the work was clearly on the recording of mythological stories and narratives as well as the rock art (and the accompanying stories/information) (Schulz 1956). Because it was assumed that Love had already covered the ethnography of the Woddordda (Wororra) whilst at Kunmunya Mission (Love 1936), it was decided that the expedition should concentrate on the Ngarinyin and Wunambal (Unambal) ‘tribes’. Lommel was to work on the latter and Petri was to work on the former. Petri subsequently mostly worked from the Government Station at Munja with the Ngarinyin, while Lommel concentrated his work further north, in an area that he named Wurewuri. Subsequently, the whole group travelled over land to the Catholic Mission of Pago (later Kalumburu) and continued their recording work during this time with members of these groups as well as

local Kwini Aboriginal people. This research method was clearly based on a strategic division of labour between the participants to maximise the time and resources that were available.

This very systematic and targeted endeavour was a unique approach in comparison to the other ethnographic work that was conducted during this time in the Kimberley. It also appears that the expedition was exercised with much greater professionalism and respect for the local communities. As mentioned above, Frobenius himself was apparently not too worried about the accuracy of his mythological recordings as he believed that he could poetically represent the hidden and underlying meanings without an exact translation (Streck 2014: 51–59). These elements are not apparent in the available literature from the Kimberley expedition. Our preliminary research involving discussions with members of the *Wanjina Wunggurr* community (some with first hand memories of the German expedition) supports the view that the expedition involved fieldwork procedures that appear to be much more aligned with today’s standards. Nevertheless, further work needs to be conducted to understand these complex relationships and entanglements.

THE RECORDING AND INTERPRETATION OF ABORIGINAL ART AND ROCK ART

Just as was the case for Frobenius’s earlier expeditions to Africa, the recording of rock art formed a centrepiece of this Kimberley expedition. In this respect, the *Frobenius-Expedition xxii* was unique in the early period of research into the Kimberley. It was already mentioned above that,

for Frobenius, rock art held a special position in his worldview. In the context of the Kimberley expedition both similarities and differences to his thinking and approach can be discerned in the way that the research was conducted and reported. The most obvious similarity is the fact that the team included two artists/painters, whose main task was to make large format copies of the rock art in the field on paper or canvas. This recording technique had a long tradition in the context of Frobenius's earlier ethnographic expeditions. It was first used in the Atlas Mountains in 1913 and continued to be a part of the expeditions' methodologies into the 1930s (Streck 2014:178). Virtually all artists involved were women. In the case of the Kimberley expedition these were Agnes S. Schulz and Gerta Kleist (Figure 3). The former had already participated in other expeditions of the Frobenius Institute to various parts of Africa and India and she would later return to Australia to work for the Frobenius Institute as the main researcher in the Northern Territory and Arnhem Land (Beinssen-Hesse 1991; Schulz 1956, 1971).

Agnes Schulz subsequently published a paper that contained descriptions and illustrations of all rock art sites that were recorded as well as respective mythological information that was provided by Petri (Schulz 1956). It is clear from the photographic archive and her own explanations that she did engage in the recording of some ethnographic information as well and further work on her notes will certainly reveal to what extent she conducted this research, including interviews, interpretations, etc. (Schulz 1956:56). Schulz's 1956 publication is the first dedicated work published on the rock art alone from this expedition. It has the character of a mostly detailed technical re-

port and it is very different in character from Frobenius's own lavishly poetic and elaborate contributions. Schulz engaged in interpretative discussions and clearly moved away from Frobenius's broad vision of rock art as endlessly mysterious and beyond the grasp of discursive description or rational analysis (see esp. Streck 2014:79). In fact, she wrote about the interpretation of the rock paintings indicating her belief that 'it is possible to appreciate them like any contemporaneous paintings, only that they are then detached from their origin and proper cultural setting' (Schulz 1956:56). She preserved Frobenius's admiration and recognition of so-called 'primitive art' as fully equivalent or even superior to modern Western art, but equally stressed the importance of viewing the art in its cultural and dynamic contexts. Schulz (1956:57) argued that the Aboriginal artists of the Kimberley were artists in a truly modern sense, and that the art was characterised by 'careful execution or affectionate embellishment', representing 'expressiveness and fine arrangement [and] certain laws of artistic composition of which we have ourselves become conscious only recently' (Figure 4).

Walsh (1994:13) has credited Agnes Schulz with introducing the infamous term 'Bradshaw paintings' into the literature (McNiven 2011; McNiven & Russell 1997). This is technically true (Schulz 1956:45ff.) and it is also the case that neither Petri (1954) nor Lommel (1952) mention this style at all in their early monographs.³ The published results of the German expedition to the Kimberley were recognized by Walsh as important contributions as such to interpret the significance of the rock art in the region (Bradley in Petri 2011: vii). They were also seen as support for the interpretation that there are no surviving



Figure 3. Gerta Kleist (left) and Agnes S. Schulz during fieldwork at the Munja Government Station in 1938, Kimberley, Northwest Australia (Archive of the *Frobenius-Institut*, Frankfurt am Main; FoA 22 0415; published with kind permission).



Figure 4. Reproductions of *Gwion Gwion* images from Malan, Kimberley, Northwest Australia; prepared by Agnes S. Schulz, 1938 (Archive of the *Frobenius-Institut*, Frankfurt am Main; FBA-B 03426; published with kind permission).

connections between *Gwion Gwion* rock art and today's Indigenous cultural traditions in the Kimberley (contra e.g. Doring 2000; see especially Walsh 2000). However, Schulz herself was very careful to consider the different dimensions of the art forms that had been encountered. She was mindful of the limitations of the fieldwork situation and unfortunately unable to integrate the cultural information that she was provided.

For instance, Schulz carefully detailed what is clearly a 'cultural' interpretation of the so-called Bradshaw figures:

'Concerning the old paintings our Ungarinyin guide to Malan had little to tell. Pointing east he said: That way are many more rocks high up the hills like Malan, with similar paintings. The black-fellows have nothing to do with them. Long ago Kujon, a black bird, painted on the rocks. He struck his bill against the stones so that it bled, and with the blood he painted. He painted no animals, only human-shaped figures which prob-

ably represent spirits. It is long since he did so' (Schulz, 1956: 47).

And yet, she was unable to integrate these cultural details into her assessment of the images Schulz (1956: 48):

'The rock paintings of the Bradshaw type seem to have no relation to present-day aboriginal culture. No interpretations are at hand such as the tradition the Kimberley tribes provide for the Wond'ina paintings. The Bradshaw paintings, therefore, must for the time being at any rate, be reckoned as prehistoric finds, which implies all the difficulties confronting the investigator of art of unknown provenience.'

It must be stressed that Schulz did not suggest in this publication that any of the rock art might not be of Aboriginal/Australian origin. As a veteran of rock art recording expeditions to Africa she did note 'an amazing resemblance to certain South African rock paintings', but immediately added: 'we certainly do not mean to imply that the curious coincidence can be taken as evidence of culture contact between Australia and Africa' (Schulz 1956: 46–47). She clearly preferred a local explanation of cultural and historical change over time and in her approach, she was closely aligned with Petri's interpretations of cultural change and dynamics in the Kimberley (e.g. Petri 1948, 1950a, 1950b): 'For anthropological research has shown, precisely, in the Kimberleys, that aborigines did not preserve their old-time culture in never-changing, rigid forms' (Schulz 1956: 48). She went on to caution that processes of cultural change were very poorly understood and the same needed to be acknowledged for an understanding of present variability of art and cultures across the region. Referring to the more recent and clearly important *Wanjina Wunggurr* paintings she stated: 'But inconsistent as the two styles of rock painting appear in their typical examples, we still find intermediate forms of technical process' (Schulz 1956: 48). She further suggested that there might indeed be some links between this style of rock art and local ritual costumes and dances, which pointed to unknown connections (Schulz 1956: 49).

For her there was no doubt that the '*Kujonfiguren*' were clearly older than the *Wanjina Wunggurr* art and respective mythology, but she suggested that the present situation must be understood because of complex cultural and historical processes and influences that have affected the local Aboriginal culture over long periods of time. She did not substantially analyse the statements of her informants and the explanations that were provided to her. Based on the limited time she had available in the field this is hardly surprising. It is more problematic that her position is uncritically replicated in simplified form in later literature (Redmond 2002; contra Walsh 1994, 2000).

In a sense, these complexities are mirrored in the diverse contributions of Andreas Lommel (Figure 5), who is

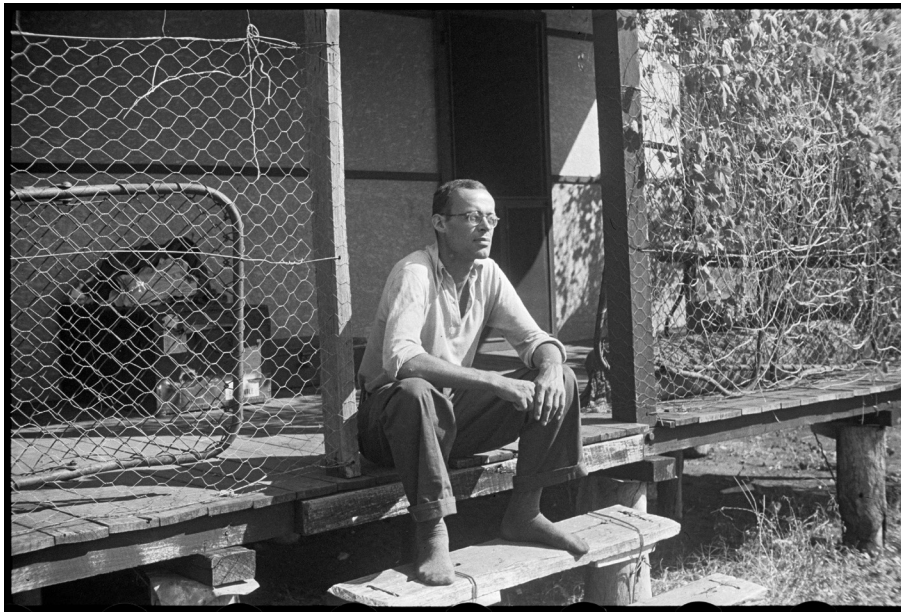


Figure 5. Andreas Lommel during fieldwork at the Munja Government Station in 1938, Kimberley, Northwest Australia (Archive of the *Frobenius-Institut*, Frankfurt am Main; FoA 22 KB33 08; published with kind permission).

said to have developed a friendship with Grahame Walsh (who published Lommel's book 'The Unambal' in 1997 in English) (Bradley in Petri 2011: vii). He is sometimes quoted to support a non-Australian origin of the *Gwion* and other Kimberley rock paintings (e.g. Beinssen-Hesse 1991; Lommel 1949, 1958a, 1966). In Lommel's published writings his position is more complex and balanced albeit somewhat inconsistent from time to time. In a lesser known article published in German in 1958 he argued clearly for thematic and stylistic continuity between the different art styles in the Kimberley under the influence of cultural contact with non-Indigenous people across Northern Australia (Lommel 1958b: 32–33). Lommel also had a long-term friendship with David Mowaljarlai, whom he met during his first visit in 1938. The latter was an outspoken defender of Indigenous rights with respect to the rock art in the Kimberley (Mowaljarlai *et al.* 1988). He was one of the Ngarinyin *munnumburra* who initiated the 'Pathways Project' to record and present a traditional view of law and culture connected with Country and rock images (Doring 2000). The two men also collaborated for a journal article on *Shamanism in Northwest Australia* (Mowaljarlai & Lommel 1994). Lommel wrote a foreword for the book *Yorro Yorro*, which Mowaljarlai published together with Jutta Malnic (1993: ix–x). Here, Lommel expressed a deep admiration and respect for the Indigenous culture and mythology of the Kimberley. He even emphasised 'the psychic healing powers of the Wunambal, Ngarinyin and Worora people' (Lommel in Mowaljarlai & Malnic 1993: x).

These views are in noticeable contrast to a range of Lommel's publications in which he showed a rather dis-

missive attitude towards Australian Indigenous art and culture. Beinssen-Hesse (1991: 148) has drawn attention to Lommel's 'prejudices and idiosyncratic theories' and has commented that in his function of director of the Ethnographic Museum in Munich he had the opportunity to express his views in popular books and publications and has consequently reached a broad audience. Possibly the most fascinating expression of these prejudices is Lommel's book *Fortschritt ins Nichts*, which can be translated as *Advancement into Nothingness* (Lommel 1969). According to its subtitle, this monograph deals with the 'modernisation of the primitive natives of Australia' and a 'description of their psychological demise'. In fact, the book is foremost a personal account of Lommel's experiences during his fieldwork in the Kimberley. It is a meditation on the ambiguities and difficulties of the cross-cultural encounter and the consequences of colonial exploitation. The book sways between a romantic fascination for 'the primitive Other' and despair or even disgust in the face of a perceived inability of Australian Indigenous people to adjust to new socio-cultural circumstances. These elements appear to mirror Leo Frobenius's attitudes, which he had expressed decades earlier (see also Lommel 1950). As mentioned above, Lommel's later contributions show a distinctive change in attitude. This can possibly be explained by a growing personal familiarity with Indigenous culture and philosophies of the Kimberley, possibly mediated by his contacts with Mowaljarlai and others.

It is interesting to note that Helmut Petri apparently experienced a parallel change in attitude during his career (Michel 1988). The book on his results from the 1938/1939 expedition was published without further fieldwork in

the same region (Petri 1954), and he only started working again in Australia from 1954/1955. As Tauchmann (1973a: XII) notes, these new experiences had a profound effect on Petri. His first book was written with a distinctly pessimistic orientation, which is clearly reflected in the title of the monograph: *Sterbende Welt in Nordwestaustralien* ('A Dying World in Northwest Australia'). Subsequently, he adopted a much more positive and optimistic view based on his experiences with processes of acculturation, in which the Australian Aborigines played an active role (Tauchmann 1973a: XII).

Areas that clearly must be examined in greater detail in future research are the intellectual links between Frobenius, his writings and the members of the expedition to the Kimberley. According to Petri's wife, Gisela Petri-Odermann, and as related by S. Beinssen-Hesse (pers. com. 2016), 'Helmut Petri considered himself a student of Pater Wilhelm Schmidt of the Vienna *Kulturkreis* School. He had only taken up the position at Frobenius's Frankfurt Institute after graduation, meaning he himself was minimally influenced by Frobenius's theories and methods. Nevertheless, he shared Frobenius's pessimistic view of the position of Indigenous cultures in the modern world. Frobenius even published a book entitled *Das sterbende Afrika* ('Dying Africa') (Frobenius 1923), which is mirrored in Petri's main work on the expedition to the Kimberley. Implied in Frobenius's primitivism and romanticism is the idea that Indigenous people had virtually no agency whatsoever and remained passive carriers and executors of cultural and mythological roles and content. Even when Frobenius imagined the earlier stages of humanity and human culture to be the more energetic and creative ones, he nevertheless saw them locked into their supposedly primitive characteristics. For him, non-Western cultures were only of value as long as they remained pure. As mentioned above, Petri moved away from this rather dim thinking in his later works, while Lommel broadly preserved Frobenius's overall orientation in content and style. The latter was severely criticised for his judgements and diffusionist views as well as for his uncritical comparisons between art and rock art from different parts of the world, which is all very reminiscent of Frobenius's unconstrained arguments and associations (Beinssen-Hesse 1991).

These few preliminary considerations already demonstrate the need for and the possibilities of properly contextualizing these early ethnographic contributions and understanding the complexities of their production. In particular, the processes influencing the fieldwork methods as well as the respective people involved, including the local communities, must be considered. The observations and interpretations in these publications need to be subjected to critical analysis particularly considering the setting in which they were produced – as we know they should not be understood as genuine snapshots or authoritative and unbiased accounts of Aboriginal life and culture in the Kimberley at the time of the expedition.

Apart from general aspects that fundamentally impact on the ethnographic encounter, at the time of the fieldwork of Petri, Schulz and Lommel the Indigenous communities in the Kimberley had already been variously and sometimes severely impacted by a range of influences since early contact at the beginning of the 20th Century (e.g. Jebb 2002; McKenzie 1969). So far, nothing is known about how these processes have influenced the fieldwork sites of recording, the fieldwork conditions and the choice, willingness, suitability and availability of informants. These issues should be considered in addition to an informed engagement with members of the contemporary *Wanjina Wunggurr* community. The critical methodological and historical considerations relating to ethnographic fieldwork that have been integral to anthropological studies for several decades would need to be considered too (Clifford & Marcus 1986; James *et al.* 1997; Marcus & Fischer 1986).

Preliminary research shows that reproductions from the expedition were presented at the Western Australian Museum in 1939 and formed a part of a travelling exhibition in the 1940s in Germany. They were even exhibited right after WWII (1948/1949) in London in the Tate Gallery as part of an exhibition on *40,000 Years of Modern Art* by the Institute of Contemporary Art (Stavriniaki 2016). Of course, none of these projects were done with permission from the Traditional Owners or even with their knowledge. In contrast, the current situation seems to hold much potential to engage with the materials in new and collaborative ways that explicitly involve the relevant members of the *Wanjina Wunggurr* communities and engage with their ideas and perspectives in sharing the research findings from 1938. The materials related to the expedition have already generated a lot of interest in relation to *Wanjina Wunggurr* community history programmes as well as inspiration for some of the local Aboriginal artists. For the latter, the *Mowanjumb Aboriginal Art & Culture Centre* has already internally made available to the community photographs of bark paintings that were produced and collected during the 1938 fieldwork. These have proven to be of great interest and inspiration to local artists. In January 2016 reproductions of rock art imagery from the 1938 Frobenius expedition to the Kimberley were exhibited with explicit permission from the relevant Traditional Owners for the first time. This was in the context of an exhibition by the *Frobenius-Institut* in Berlin at the *Martin-Gropius-Bau: Kunst der Vorzeit: Felsbilder aus der Sammlung Frobenius* (see Kohl *et al.* 2016). The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue that also includes a paper collaboratively written by Traditional Owners Leah Umbagai, Janet Oobagooma, and the authors of this paper (Doohan *et al.* 2016).

CONCLUSION

The significance of the so-called Frobenius Expedition to the Kimberley in 1938 and 1939 has been generally un-

dervalued and poorly assessed. It has also been misrepresented. First, because informed and collaborative, sensitive research has so far not been conducted on the available materials, either in Australia or in Germany. Secondly, because the issue of language barriers and problematic translations has not been considered. The current situation, however, holds much potential to enter a new phase of engagement between relevant parties and institutions and to develop new and innovative collaborative projects on different levels of enquiry and analysis. These could encompass intellectual and community-driven projects, exhibition and art projects, cultural preservation and re-discovery.

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Endnotes

1. <http://www.hesperianpress.com/index.php/booklist/titles-a-d/a-titles/645-australian-medicine-man-the>
2. The *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* (NSDAP) was the party that was chaired by Adolf Hitler between 1921 and 1945. In his function as chairman, he was appointed Chancellor of Germany in 1933.
3. In the reconstructed folders in the archive of the *Frobenius-Institut* the photos that show the respective rock art images are termed 'Kujonfiguren', 'Kujon-Malereien' or 'Malereien des älteren Stils'. The explanations in the original documentation also show the same tension between statements that suggest that there are no cultural connections between the present Aboriginal communities and the paintings and the recording of stories that provide explanation for exactly this relationship.

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Du Pessimisme à la Collaboration: l'expédition allemande Frobenius (1938–1939) en Australie et la représentation de l'art graphique et pariétal des Kimberley.

RÉSUMÉ :

En 1938 et 1939, l'*Institut für Kulturmorphologie*, basé à Francfort-sur-le-Main, Allemagne, mena une expédition ethnographique dans une partie reculée des Kimberley en Australie Occidentale. Bien qu'elle fut précédée de quelques activités et publications, cette expédition représente la première initiative dédiée à la réalisation d'un travail ethnographique détaillé et approfondi dans la région. Il s'agit également de la première tentative se concentrant spécifiquement sur l'enregistrement des dessins d'art rupestre et d'informations ethnographiques associées. Au cours des dernières décennies, l'importance de cette expédition, des publications respectives et des collections liées, en Allemagne et en Australie, a été reconnue à plusieurs reprises, notamment en ce qui concerne la perception et la compréhension de l'art rupestre des Kimberley. Cependant, aucune recherche systématique et collaborative impliquant les communautés locales n'a été menée. Par conséquent, la collection et les informations ethnographiques associées n'ont pas été correctement évaluées et ont même fait l'objet d'interprétations erronées. Les récents efforts de collaboration entre les communautés indigènes concernées *Wandjina Wunggurr* et des chercheurs d'Australie et d'Allemagne ont permis d'entrer dans une nouvelle phase d'interaction avec ces documents, produisant d'intéressants résultats académiques et non-académiques. Dans cet article, nous fournissons quelques évaluations préliminaires critiques et contextuelles de la littérature associée à cette expédition, ainsi que de la façon dont y ont été représentés et conceptualisés l'art aborigène et l'art rupestre.